SEPTEMBER 1994

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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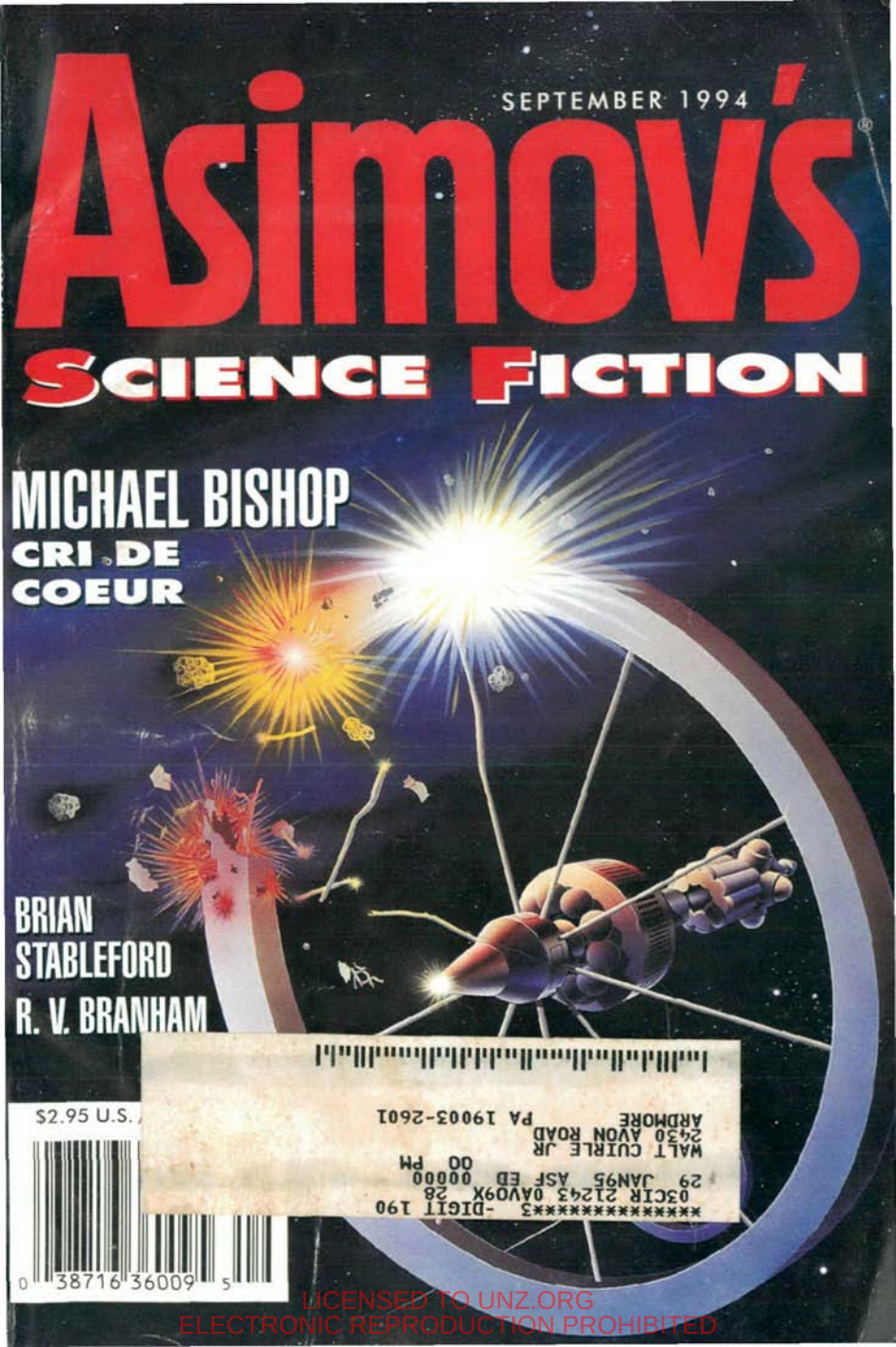

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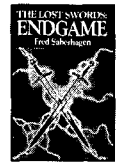

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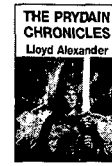

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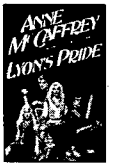

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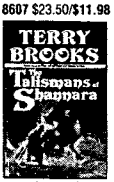

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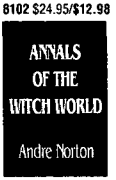

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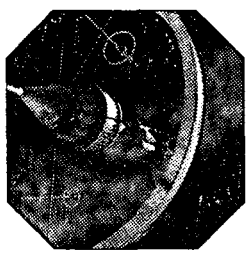

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Stories from *Asimov's* have won twenty-two Hugos and twenty-one Nebula Awards, and our editors have recieved nine Hugo Awards for Best Editor. Asimov's was also the 1993 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

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Isaac Asimov: Editorial Director (1977–1992)
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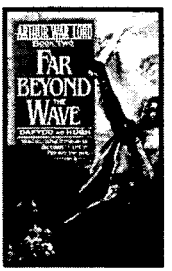

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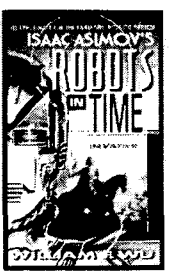

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REFLECTIONS by Robert Silverberg

Enwonderment.

It's an awful word. It's mine. I literally dreamed it up.

One night I was addressing some congregation of teachers in my sleep—the keynote speaker at an imaginary academic hoedown that I must have conjured out of too much Nepalese lamb curry, or was it the appetizer of baked spleen at that Lebanese restaurant that did it to me?—and I heard myself telling the assembled educators that it was important for them to foster a state of "enwonderment" in their pupils. It was, I suppose, some sort of cockeyed linguistic analogy with "empowerment," which everybody is talking about these days, or perhaps the root word was "enrichment," which I gather is still one of the big academic buzzwords.

You know how a dream can be so horrible that it wakes you up? You're in a natural history museum, say, and suddenly the fossil dinosaurs start snorting and snuffling and chasing you through the halls like a bunch of velociraptors out of *Jurassic Park*. Or you're arriving at the hotel where the World Science Fiction Convention is about to take place and just as you enter the crowded lobby you notice that you've forgotten to put your clothes on that morning. The alarms go off in your dreaming mind, and you find yourself wide awake, sweating and muttering, reassuring yourself as best you can that whatever it was you dreamed is in fact not happening to you at all.

That's how it was with me and "enwonderment." A really gross linguistic construction upsets me the way getting chased around a museum by velociraptors would upset most other people. And so I awakened with the nasty sound of that word still ringing in my mind, and the recollection that it was I, the urbane and literate Robert Silverberg, who had uttered it in front of an audience of professional educators.

And yet—and yet—

Forget about what a klutzy-sounding word it is. Indigestion or not, I think my dreaming mind may have been on to something. For is it not true that one of the primary things we science-fiction writers try to accomplish is to bring a note of, well, enwonderment to our readers' minds—to startle and delight and astonish them with miraculous and magical visions of wondrous things?

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I say *one of* the primary things because there are many sorts of science fiction, and many different things that people look for in the particular kind of SF they read. Some like to read about clever gadgets and their applications to tough problems. Some are after sociological or technological or political speculations about the near future. Some are turned on by social satire (which usually means that they like reading stories that make fun of things they don't like). Some have an inexhaustible appetite for grand epics of future galactic empires built on analogies with Rome and Byzantium, and others prefer trips back to Rome or Byzantium themselves. Some want to get embroiled in a futuristic mystery; some like tales of heroic Schwarzeneggeresque action involving lots of splashy weapons; some—

Different folks, different strokes. There's enough SF around for everyone's tastes.

My own SF reading over the past five decades has embodied some of all of the above. The names of the magazines I read in my youth indicate the range: *Astounding Science Fiction* one day, for the gadgetry and sociological speculations; *Planet Stories* the next for the ray-gun and spaceship stuff; *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* for the trips back in time to lost empires. But what I was really searching for most of the time, and what I have tried to embody above all else in my own writing since I made the big shift from consumer of science fiction to

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creator of it about forty years ago, is passages that give me the verbal equivalent of what I feel when I stare up at the stars in the night sky, or peer into the eyepiece of a microscope at a drop of water teeming with protozoa, or walk the columned aisles of a Roman or Egyptian temple thousands of years old. Passages like these:

"When at last the time for migration was approaching, a specially designed vegetation was shipped to Neptune and established in the warm area to fit it for man's use. Animals, it was decided, would be unnecessary. Subsequently a specially designed human species, the Ninth Men, was transported to man's new home. The giant Eighth Men could not themselves inhabit Neptune. The trouble was not merely that they could scarcely support their own weight, let alone walk, but that the atmospheric pressure on Neptune was unendurable. For the great planet bore a gaseous envelope thousands of miles deep. The solid globe was scarcely more than the yolk of a huge egg. . . ."

"In my mundane consciousness, I could never have imagined the existence, anywhere in this universe, of this thousand-peaked range of glistening black and bloodred rock, bordering a steaming sea of dull silver under a sky that was not blue but that consisted of unbearably blinding mother-of-pearl and opal fish scales, behind which lurked the blackness of space."

"It had not been fear of physical menace that had shaken his reason, nor the appearance of the creature—he could recall nothing of how it looked. It had been a feeling of sadness infinitely compounded which had flooded through him at the instant, a sense of tragedy, of grief insupportable and unescapable, of infinite weariness. He had been flicked with emotions many times too strong for his spiritual fiber and which he was no more fitted to experience than an oyster is to play a violin.

"He felt that he had learned all about the High Ones a man could learn and still endure. He was no longer curious. The shadow of that vicarious emotion ruined his sleep, brought him sweating out of dreams."

"I cannot convey the sense of abominable desolation that hung over the world. The red eastern sky, the northward blackness, the salt Dead Sea, the stony beach crawling with these foul, slow-stirring monsters, the uniform poisonous-looking green of the lichenous plants, the thin air that hurts one's lungs; all contributed to an appalling effect. I moved on a hundred years, and there was the same red sun—a little larger, a little duller—the same dying sea, the same chill air, and the same crowd of earthy crustacea creeping in and out among the green weed and the

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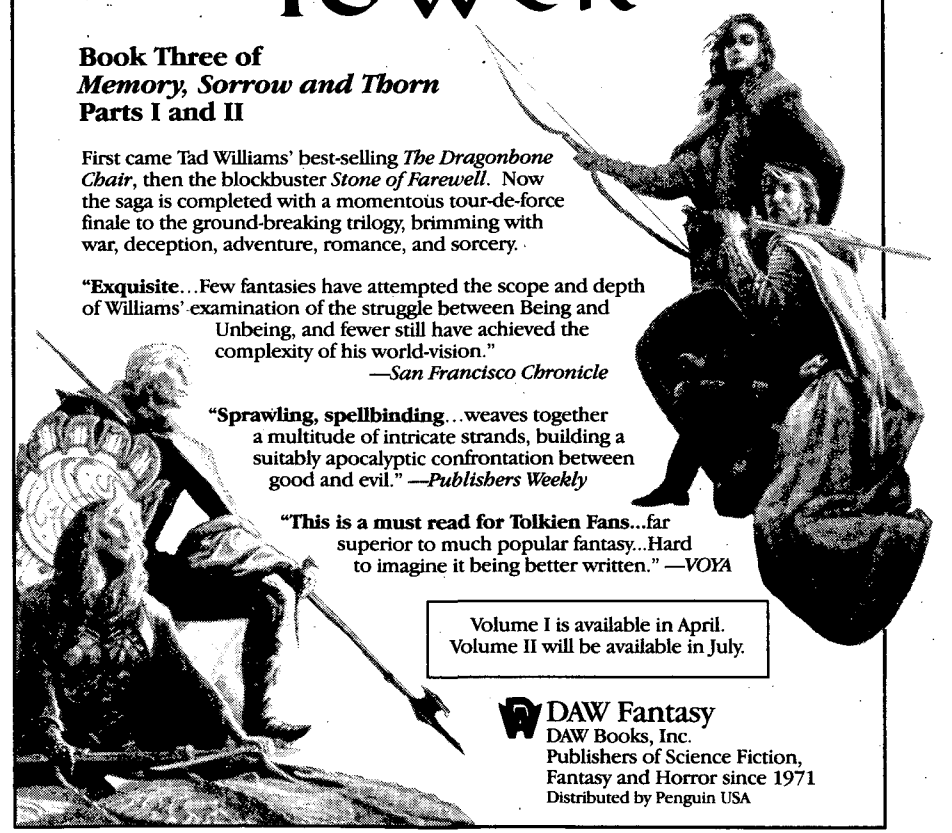

First came Tad Williams' best-selling *The Dragonbone Chair*, then the blockbuster *Stone of Farewell*. Now the saga is completed with a momentous tour-de-force finale to the ground-breaking trilogy, brimming with war, deception, adventure, romance, and sorcery.

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red rocks. And in the westward sky I saw a curved pale line like a vast new moon."

"Worlds young . . . . warm . . . . volcanic and steaming . . . . the single cell emerging from the slime of warm oceans to propagate on primordial continents . . . . other worlds, innumerable . . . . life divergent in all branches from the single cell . . . . amorphous globules . . . . amphibian . . . . crustacean . . . . reptilian . . . . plant . . . . insect . . . . bird . . . . mammal . . . . all possible variations of combinations . . . . crystalline beings sentient and reasoning . . . . great shimmering columnar forms, seemingly liquid, defying gravity by some strange power of cohesion. . . ."

"I talked with the mind of Yiang-Li, a philosopher from the cruel empire of Tsan-Chan, which is to come in 5,000 A.D.; with that of a general of the great-headed brown people who held South Africa in 50,000 B.C.; with that of a twelfth-century Florentine monk named Bartolomeo Corsi; with that of a king of Lomar who ruled that terrible polar land one hundred thousand years before the squat, yellow Inutos came from the west to engulf it."

These are quotes from *The Time Machine*, by H. G. Wells, "He Who Shrank," by Henry Hasse, *Last and First Men*, by Olaf Stapledon, "By His Bootstraps," by Robert A. Heinlein, and *Star of the Unborn*, by Franz Werfel. These are some of the passages that did it for me, forty-odd years back, when I was first being exposed to the incurable science fiction virus. I'm not going to tell you which comes from what. If science fiction means half as much to you as it does to me, you already know. And if you don't know, I suggest that you check out all the items I've mentioned and find out for yourself. You have a treat coming.

Of course, these are *my* enwonderment texts—a few of them, anyway—passages that mean more to me, in a specifically science-fictional way, than any quantity of clever plotting or depth of character analysis or elegance of literary style. For such commodities as those, I can always turn to John Le Carré or Thomas Mann or John Updike, or Shakespeare and Proust and Joyce, or a lot of other people who never wrote for *Astounding Science Fiction*. As I've noted, my quotations go back some decades, and then some—as do I. I'd be interested in seeing little excerpts from *your* reading lists—passages from the SF books or stories of recent years (whatever seems recent to you—1970, 1980, 1990)—that have kindled in you that sense of—yes, enwonderment—which is, I believe, the highest achievement of science fiction. ●

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LETTERS

Dear *Asimov's*,

This is my second year participating in the Readers' Awards, and I would like to thank you for making my decisions so difficult to make. There were so many excellent stories this year that it took almost three hours to narrow down the contenders to the top three in each category. In fact, in the short story category you will notice I have a tie for second place. I could not decide which was better.

In the Interior Artist category I did not name which story the art was connected to simply because Laurie Harden, Steve Cavello, and Alan M. Clark each had multiple works of art that deserved recognition. Laurie Harden's work was exceptional. I hope to see more of her art in the future.

I would like to thank *Asimov's* for providing a magazine that enriches my life and stimulates my imagination.

Ms. Jeanette Sawatzky
Langley, BC
Canada

While we admit it's confusing, you filled out the Readers' Award ballot correctly. The interior and cover artist awards are for the artists' annual bodies of work rather than for their individual pieces.

—Sheila Williams

Dear *Asimov's*,

Your November Double Issue is superb! Faves: Swanwick's "Cold Iron" is well written and unusual in concept; "Hard Fantasy"? Neal Barrett's "Cush" is a beautifully written and highly cathartic story —deserves Best Novelette of 1993! *Powerful stuff!* "Ice Atlantis" is okay, not great. Norman Spinrad is the *best* critic of SF.

Stan Fink
Philadelphia, PA

Dear Sir,

I would like to congratulate you and your team on a fine magazine, and let you know you have fans in this part of the world as well!

I have been reading *Asimov's* for many years now, and watched it grow from strength to strength. The passing of Dr. Asimov was a great tragedy, but the magazine will prosper as his proud legacy.

What I particularly like is how many first-time writers you publish, although you accommodate all the big names as well. This makes for a lively and unpredictable magazine.

No one else seems to have commented on this, but the redesign of the front cover is great, as the new logo leaves it less cluttered and gives more prominence to the art.

If I have to choose one story that

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stood out in recent months, it has to be "The Undifferentiated Object of Desire," by Ian McDonald, in the June 1993 issue. Living in a country trying to extricate itself from the consequences of racism, and witnessing the ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia, makes me acutely aware of SF's increasingly important need to address bigotry and xenophobia—problems that malign the world.

I am sure I will be reading *Asimov's* for many more years to come. All the best for the future.

Yours sincerely,

Gerhard Hope
Pietermaritzburg
Natal, South Africa

Dear Editors & Gentlepersons,

Regarding the Readers' Award, what you ask of us may not be possible! You can't really expect a faithful reader to pick only three favorites from a year's worth of first class fiction. If you people would slip up every once in a while, or lower your standards, voting would be so much easier!

This reader would like to vote your editorial staff an award for maintaining excellence consistently throughout the five years I've subscribed.

Thank you,

Cheryl D'Angelo
Olympia, WA

Dear Mr. Dozois:

Terry Bisson's "The Hole in the Hole" proved for me to be an enjoyable experience in nostalgia. I once was almost hit by a red P1800 driven by my insurance agent! Foolishly, I had backed my Rambler from my driveway in Fairbanks, Alaska, into the space the P1800 was ready to occupy. The agent successfully evaded me with "Defensive Driving" and a disgusted wag of his head. He had formerly—you guessed it—owned a Volvo 122, the first of the marque I'd seen, back in 1960. I liked the black 122, which sort of recalled a '40 Ford, on a slightly smaller scale.

Bisson is one of the better newcomers, isn't he? He has the sort of Stephen King quality of writing about persons the average man on the street can identify with. Hopefully you will accept many more of his tales!

Bruce Moffitt
Brookfield, MO

Dear Gardner,

Good to see another Avram Davidson story. Here's hoping that there are more yet to surface.

Good also to see your tribute to him. For the most part, very much on the mark, but I don't agree that the best of his novels fail to reach the level of accomplishment of his short stories. I'd rank *Virgil in Averno* as one of the best novels I've read, genre or otherwise, in the last ten years.

All best,

Bruce Boston
Albany, CA

Asimov's SF magazine:

I merely wished to say that I haven't seen your magazine since issue number one, which I still have. I was much surprised by the comfort and attractiveness of your format.

The magazine is laid out, strangely enough, for those who

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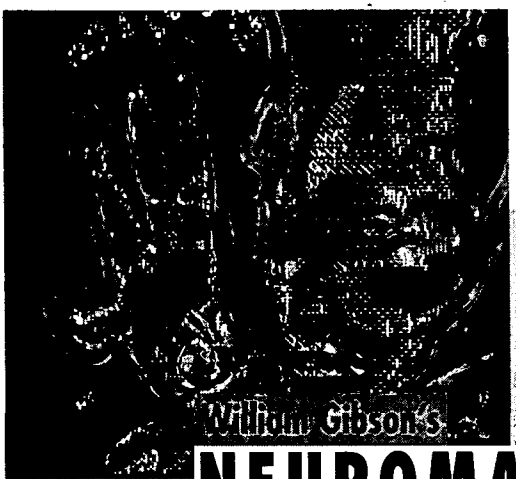
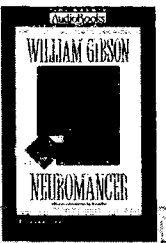
"The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to a dead channel."





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actually *read*; is comfortable to hold in that the soft, floppy pages (as opposed to the usual tight binding) encourage one to pick it up and read.

Not only that, but most of what I have read from the November issue was actually *good*. The artwork too, of course. I can't remember being as surprised and delighted by a magazine.

I guess that the only complaint I could find is that the beautiful cover was badly beaten up and torn upon arrival. Not your fault.
Cordially,

Mr. Phillip Krumm
San Antonio, TX

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I have a story I would like to share with your readers.

I am a mission specialist astronaut. I flew my first space shuttle mission on STS-57 this past summer (6/21-7/1/93). Science fiction was what originally got me interested in the space program, when I stumbled across *A Wrinkle in Time* in a public library in 1966. I found *The Foundation Trilogy* very shortly thereafter and *Foundation* immediately became my favorite book, and Dr. Asimov my favorite author. So when I had an opportunity to bring a book with me on my flight, *Foundation* was the only possible choice.

My intention was to read it while exercising on the bicycle, which I did. However, our flight was extended two days due to bad weather at our planned landing site. With the extra time this gave us (almost all the experiments had been deactivated), I couldn't resist indulging in my favorite hobby—reading science fiction. So, I unstowed *Foundation*, curled up under one of the flight deck overhead windows, and read Asimov by earthlight.
Sincerely,

Janice E. Voss
Houston, TX

MOVING ?

If you want your subscription to ASIMOV'S to keep up with you, send both your old address and your new one (and the zip codes for both, please!) to our subscription department:

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P.O. Box 5130 Harlan, IA 51593-5130

Dear Mr. Dozois,

I'm fifteen years old, and I know there have been numerous letters published mourning The Good Doctor's passing, and I just had to write as well.

For several years now, I have been writing seriously with the hope that someday I could make a profession out of my love for words. This love of writing took the form of science fiction, for the most part. But, you see, I never fully realized my love for science fiction until I picked up the *Foundation* series, shortly after The Good Doctor's passing.

Since then, I've read as much of his writing as I could, and I've

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loved every word of it. When I found out that my father actually *shook hands* with the Good Doctor after one of his lectures during the 1970s, I was thrilled.

After reading his autobiography, I realized for the first time how his love for learning reached out to *everything*, and I respected him for it all the more. As I discovered more about this great man, I grew more and more upset that he was gone. But I realized, one day, that he managed to accomplish what most others only strive to do without success. . . . He lived his life to the fullest possible. . . . No one could hope to do more.

As I write this now, I wish there were some way that I could have thanked Isaac Asimov, while he was still with us, but just want you all to know this: His very *life* serves as my inspiration, every day from morning to night. As I gain more and more enjoyment out of writing, I know I owe a great deal of my happiness to him.

And to this great man, I am eternally grateful.

Greg Miller
Ellicott City, MO

THANKS, FROM JANET ASIMOV

When Isaac died, many hundreds of people wrote condolence letters to me. I read all the letters when they arrived but was too overwhelmed with emotional and physical exhaustion to do anything with them except pack them into two big shopping bags, which have been in my closet ever since.

The other day I was thinking about the second anniversary of Isaac's death—a few weeks away as I write this, weeks in the past by the time this letter will be published. I reread the condolence letters and found them overwhelming—an outpouring of love and admiration for Isaac, whether the writer had met him or only read what he wrote.

Both times I've read the letters they were, for me, a catharsis of grief. I hope they were for the letter writers, many of whom were incredibly eloquent in expressing what Isaac meant to them and to the world. One writer even paid Isaac the best of compliments, by quoting what had been said of Voltaire: "If he had not lived, it would have been necessary to invent him."

It's not possible for me to answer each letter personally.

After considering the advice given me by friends—to send each person a form thank you card—I decided that I didn't want to do that. There will be some who won't see this issue of the magazine, but for those who do, please know that I am grateful.

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Brian Stableford

THE TREE OF LIFE

To paraphrase Mark Twain, news of the author's death (in the United Kingdom's 1993 *Writer's Directory*), while slightly unnerving, has been greatly exaggerated. Mr. Stableford is still going strong. His latest novel—The *Carnival of Destruction*—will be published by Simon & Schuster (UK) in October.

Illustration by Gina Mohr LoParo

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The clamor of the wind in the trees kept me awake all night, although I was calm enough in myself. It must have been nearly dawn—the darkest hour, according to rumor—when I finally drifted off. I slept for a long time, and my dreams were pleasant; when I woke up, the storm had blown itself out and the sky was blue again. After the strident night, the gentle afternoon seemed preternaturally quiet.

I went out to inspect the damage to the house, confident that it would be trivial. Grandfather was no architect, but he had been fully aware of the dangers of tropical storms when he had erected the windowed façade to mask, protect, and let a little light into the living-quarters and workplaces burrowed into the hillside. I was more worried about the trees, many of which hadn't the benefit of millions of years of adaptive natural selection to brace them against the raking fingers of hurricanes, but very few of those near to the house had actually fallen, and the debris of loose branches and palm fronds wasn't too bad.

The only tree that really mattered, situated deep in the island's heartland, was too well-protected to have come to any harm.

Later, I went down to the beach to check the boat. That *had* taken a battering; a big wave had snatched it up and hurled it against the palms which fringed the beach, and the timbers in the port side near the bow were badly splintered. I knew that it would take me at least a week to fix it unless the fishermen from Bahu condescended to lend a hand next time they came over. I wasn't optimistic about that, but I wasn't unduly troubled by the prospect of the boat being out of commission for a while. I had no plans to go fishing, and no desire to go anywhere else.

It wasn't until I went around the boat to check the starboard side that the blob of dayglo orange in the distance caught my eye. I knew immediately what it was: a self-inflating podsuit like the ones issued to passengers by the masters of the tourist boats which carried gawkers through the archipelago from one petty Eden to another. The trade had boomed in the last thirty or forty years, while the once-green continental landmasses had gradually turned black, and there must have been fifteen or twenty boats on tour when the storm hit. It was difficult to believe that any of them had gone down, but not so difficult to believe—tourists being tourists—that someone relishing the experience of the hurricane might have gone over the side. One of the many mental attributes that have atrophied in the rigorously ordered modern world is a sense of danger.

The podsuit was in bad shape, given that it had supposedly been designed to survive *anything*. The faceplate hadn't shattered, but it was badly scratched and scarred, and the electronic beacon had been reduced to shards. Its occupant was unconscious, and when I had excavated several layers of foamy plastic to get to her underclothing and the skin

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beneath, I was horrified by the extent of the bruising. It was obvious that she had been bounced against the reef at least a dozen times before a big wave finally carried her over.

A quick check revealed that she had at least one major fracture, of the left tibia, and three less nasty breaks, but her internal technology was already hard at work. She had that tell-tale all-over warmth which repair nanotech generates when it gets down to serious business, and I figured that she'd be perfectly okay provided that her brain had managed to withstand the hammering without sustaining a major hemorrhage.

In my usual paranoid fashion, I immediately began to wonder whether there really had been an accident, or whether this was some clever ploy to sneak an agent into my camp. It was difficult to believe that any multinational agency—let alone a UN organization—could have *planned* to subject one of its operatives to that kind of punishment in the interests of chasing a myth, but perhaps they hadn't realized how dangerous it was to cast someone adrift in an "infallible lifesaver" during a full-scale storm. The balance of probability, however, seemed to favor the hypothesis that it really *had* been an accident, or a case of reckless misadventure.

Whatever the truth of the matter, I could hardly leave the injured woman on the beach. When I had all the wrapping off, I carried her as gently as I could up to the house, and put her to bed. Then I went back—hurriedly, because the sun was setting—in order to get rid of every vestige of the dayglo orange. I searched the wreckage of the podsuit for bugs, just as I had earlier searched her body and belt, but there was nothing in the least suspicious.

I took the debris into the forest and buried it where no one would ever find it. If she did turn out to be a spy, and I had to do something about it, I didn't want anyone to have incontrovertible evidence that she'd reached the island. As long as the hypersensitive guardians of the stabilized world couldn't be sure that Grandfather's island harbored anything dangerous, they were content to turn a blind eye to its anomalous status, but anything which provided legal grounds for an invasion might start a snowball effect.

I must confess, though, that there was another side of me which wasn't entirely displeased by the fact of the woman's arrival, even though the timing could have been more convenient. If it really were an accident of fate, there might be a certain propriety about it. An Eden with only an Adam and a forbidden tree—and, of course, an absent Creator—is two characters short of a myth. However unappealing the thought was that I might have been landed with a treacherous serpent, the idea that I might have been gifted with an Eve had a certain charm.

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I'd been alone for a long time, and I was well used to it, but everyone has dreams and fantasies, just as everyone has secrets to keep.

The woman slept right around the clock while her inbuilt medicare kit worked on her bones and her bruises. Her nanotech was more nearly state-of-the-art than mine, but in this day and age that didn't necessarily signify that she was rich. Preservative nanomachines were one of the key elements of the great stabilization: a foundation stone of the kind of equality enshrined in the New Rights of Man.

It was impossible to tell how old she might be; overt indications of aging were way out of fashion, and almost all the modern signatories to the Treaty went to their voluntary deaths looking as fresh as the day they became old enough to sign.

I went to look at the tree while she was still comatose, but most of the fruits were still a day or two away from full ripeness, and I thought it best to leave the gathering until I had a clearer idea of what the woman's arrival might portend.

I cleaned myself up in honor of her anticipated reawakening, trimming my hair and beard. All my supposedly self-repairing suits had suffered more than somewhat from the ravages of Grandfather's thorns, but I found one whose scars were reasonably discreet.

I watched the woman's reaction very closely when she first opened her eyes and saw me. Doubtless she'd have been well schooled in the art of astonishment if she were a fake, but there was always a possibility that she might give herself away. Her eyes grew wide with alarm, but the alarm died what seemed to be a natural death as it was overtaken by the grateful recognition that she was, after all, still alive, and by the reassuring knowledge that whoever I might be—even if I were a primitive or a green zealot—I was unlikely to mean her any harm.

"Where am I?" she asked, sticking to the time-honored script.

"On today's maps, the island's called Moro," I told her. "One of Grandfather's little jokes. It's not on any of the tour routes, but they tell tall-tales about it on some of the islands which are, so you might have heard of me. I'm John Drummond."

She didn't seem to recognize the name. She was supposed to respond in kind by telling me her own name, but she didn't. "The boat . . ." she said, and stopped. I couldn't tell whether she'd been halted by uncertainty or whether she'd paused for melodramatic effect. "I couldn't hold on . . . did it go down?"

"No idea," I told her, drily. "I doubt it—they're difficult to sink even when they're crewed by idiots. You turned up on the beach in one of those fancy lifesaving suits, fully inflated for total protection against any and all eventualities. You didn't have an easy time getting past the reef,

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but your molecular machinery seems to have patched you up as good as new."

She was still looking at me as if I were an alien—which, in a way, I was. I was probably taller and more solid than she was used to. Height wasn't as far beyond the pale of fashion as wrinkles, but there weren't too many two-meter men abroad in the brave new world, even in its remoter outposts, and I was a full thirty centimeters taller than she was. Even without the wrinkles, I must have looked uncommonly old in her eyes. Did she, I wondered, know how old I actually was?

"What's your name?" I asked, when she still didn't offer it.

"Haven't you checked my smartcard?" she countered, lifting the sheet to look down at her lightly clad body. Her belt was still in place, with all its fixtures and fittings. "Surely you've reported finding me."

"I haven't got the machinery to interrogate a smartcard," I told her, "nor the means to report your presence here."

"You're a primitive?" she said, jumping to the natural conclusion—or perhaps following a carefully rehearsed script.

"Not exactly," I said. "I'm a sort of betwixt and between. I have good internal technology, but not much in the way of externals. No cable to the Net, no virtual reality suit, no artificial photosynthetics. I'm not a citizen of the new world order. This island still qualifies as property under the pre-crash rules. It was willed to me by my grandfather, and the UN hasn't got around to annexing it yet, even though I won't play ball with the tourist trade. I like to think of it as one of the last independent nations on the face of the earth, and of myself as its once and future king, but you'd be perfectly entitled to think of me as a victim of delusions of grandeur. Are you going to tell me your name or not?"

"Hilda," she said, absent-mindedly, while she furrowed her brow as if to struggle with the implications of what I'd told her. "Hilda March. You mean you're not a signatory to the Treaty?" It was a nice, suitably innocuous name—and a predictable question.

"No, I'm not," I said. "I took the other option. I'm content to live as long as I can and die in my own good time, bravely sustaining whatever mental degeneration Mother Nature cares to inflict. I'm a hundred and eighty years old and completely *compos mentis*, at least in my own estimation. By way of compensation for my insistence of staying the course, I've fathered no heir and don't intend to. I honestly don't know whether Grandfather would approve, and I honestly don't care."

Three mentions of the word *grandfather* was enough; she either caught on, or figured it was safe enough to pretend to have caught on. "Drummond," she repeated, with an echo of recognition. "Are you . . .?"

"Samuel Morgan Drummond's grandson," I finished for her. "Contrary to anthropological speculation, not all the makers of the world *before*

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yours were myth-figures. Some of them actually existed." She knew it was some sort of joke—there was no doubt whatsoever of the actual existence of all the heroes and villains of the Second Industrial Revolution, although some of their creations had been relegated to the status of mere legends—but she couldn't quite see the irony of it. I was *almost* convinced by her attitude that she was exactly what she seemed to be, and nothing more, but I couldn't afford to relax completely. At any other time, I could have let it go, but the fruiting of the Haeckel tree—which didn't happen every year—always filled me with a suspenseful sense of hopeful anticipation, attended by a corollary shadow of dark anxiety.

"You'd better come and have something to eat," I said. "You've been unconscious for rather a long time, and I couldn't rig up any kind of drip-feed to help your nanomachines along. You probably won't like the food, but it's all reasonably nutritious."

She nodded slowly. "I'm terribly thirsty," she said, as she sat up for the first time. "I could do with a drink—water, that is."

"Water and goats' milk are all I have," I told her, helping her to get up from the bed. She was able to stand without too much discomfort—the fractured tibia had been very efficiently patched up—but she was a little unsteady as I led her to the door, and I kept my hand on her arm in case she stumbled.

The physical contact was not unwelcome. I liked her. I *wanted* her to be what she seemed to be, and I wanted the accident of fate which had brought her to the island to turn out to be a happy one.

Unfortunately, wanting things to turn out right is rarely enough to make certain that they do.

While Hilda March drank her water and ate what was to her an extremely unsatisfactory meal, I explained why I couldn't summon anyone to pick her up. I told her—truthfully—that I'd once kept a radio for emergencies, but hadn't bothered to repair it when it broke down, because I didn't want people bothering me. I also told her about the damage to my boat, and explained that it might be a week or more before a boat from one of the other islands came to call. If they were searching for her, a copter might arrive before then, but not necessarily.

"I must admit," I said, smoothly, "that most visitors are unwelcome here, tourists especially. I value my privacy, and find it difficult to tolerate its violation. I make no claims upon the myriad bureaucratic institutions which have taken it upon themselves to regulate and automate the affairs of modern man, and so long as they tolerate my refusal to allow them to make claims on me, I'll continue to refuse. I hope you won't mind too much if I leave you to your own devices while you're here—I have plenty of work to do."

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It was an awkward speech, which struck me after I'd made it as being slightly stupid and not really what I meant to say. It got the response it deserved.

"I won't presume too much upon your hospitality," she told me, in a faintly wounded manner, as she pushed her plate away across the tabletop and sat back, trying to find a comfortable way of sitting in a chair which was far harder than the ones she was used to. "You may have no radio of your own, but there was a signaling device attached to the podsuit. That will summon someone to pick me up."

"I'm afraid not," I told her. "The device was pulverized, apparently as a result of one of your several collisions with the reef. It might, of course, have provided an indication of your whereabouts before it ceased to function, but I wouldn't bank on it. A boat from Bahu will arrive eventually—the islanders come here to exchange fish for fruit and vegetables that they don't cultivate themselves. Their politics are at the far end of the grey-green spectrum, but they do have emergency communication equipment. A copter will come out from Palau to pick you up."

"Thanks," she said, in a lukewarm tone. "I dare say I'll survive, in spite of the food."

"In the meantime," I said, "feel free to look around. You might enjoy it—this really is an unspoiled demi-paradise, unlike the tourist traps where the cruise ships go. On the other hand, it hasn't been sanitized the way the tourist islands have, so you'll have to be careful. The beach is safe, and so is the forest on this side of the ridge, but the interior is virtually impenetrable because of the swamps and thickets of poisonous thorn-bushes. Your internal technology will make sure the thorns can't hurt you badly, but any scratches you sustain will sting horribly."

"Are there snakes too?" she asked. I couldn't tell whether it was an honest question or a subtle joke.

"No. There are less than fifty vertebrate species on the island. The vast majority are birds and bats. Grandfather didn't get around to introducing any mammal species except the goats he kept for meat and milk. He was a purist tree-man at heart, and he wasn't much concerned with adding animal species to decorate his forest. My guinea-fowl were his, too, although I don't bother to keep them penned up anymore, but the other species winged their own way here from the other islands. I've often thought of establishing a colony of monkeys, but one has to be careful; a major upset to the island's ecology could be disastrous. A small group of cats or mice could turn into a devastating plague within half a dozen generations."

"If the local ecology was so well-designed," she said, "how come the interior is full of bushes with poisonous thorns?" It was a good question, but it might have been entirely innocent. The real answer was that they

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were there to keep inquisitive intruders at bay without advertising too loudly the fact that there was something very specific that Grandfather had wanted them kept away *from,* but I wasn't about to tell her that.

"They did get out of hand," I said, "but they aren't a problem so far as I'm concerned. I'm used to them, and over the years I've become immune to their stings in much the same way that beekeepers become immune to bee-stings. As I said, your repair nanotech will easily fix up any damage you sustain, but it's best to be careful."

"I will be," she promised, ambiguously.

She *was* careful. She didn't go far into the forest, and she trod very carefully.

If she were a spy from the UN or one of the corps, she'd have known already what a thankless task it was trying to get into the interior. Several people had tried, and although no one had died, they'd had a profoundly uncomfortable time. None had got to within a hundred meters of the Haeckel tree. You might think that it wouldn't be too hard searching an island less than four kilometers across, but when the island is as rugged as Moro, and as comprehensively decked in hostile shrubbery, it isn't easy at all—and when every tree is unique and you haven't a clue what the particular one you might be interested in actually *looks* like, the task of tracking it down becomes genuinely impossible.

As the old proverb says, if you want to hide a tree, you only have to put it in a forest. It's all the more effectively hidden, of course, if no one can be sure that it really exists.

The UN inspectorate had once tried parachuting men directly into the interior so that they wouldn't have to run the thorny gauntlet, and had more than once tried depositing clever bugs to keep tabs on me, but the parachutists and the bugs had found the island environment equally uncongenial. I was determined that if they had changed tactics and sent a seductress in, she'd find the going just as hard, and the task just as frustrating—but I was equally determined that she shouldn't suffer unduly from my suspicions if she *were* genuine, so I didn't keep too close a watch on her and I tried to be a good host. I didn't make any advances to her—I couldn't be sure how she'd react, given that her normal sex-life was probably restricted to the idosyncratic deployment of intimate technology, and it seemed only polite to wait for some sign of encouragement.

She went with me a couple of times when my daily routines took me into the forest, but she wasn't sneaky about it. I didn't go anywhere near the heart of the maze during the next couple of days, even though I was curious to know how the new crop was faring.

"I'm glad I was washed up here," she said, on the evening of the second

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day after her awakening. "It really is a marvelous place. Now that I can get things in perspective, this is the kind of experience that makes a holiday into something more, something special. I'm glad that happened."

Flattery can get you almost anywhere, I thought, *but sometimes your target needs to know where it is that you want to go.*

"It must make a change from all that orderly black and white," I conceded. "But I suppose you'll be glad to get back to less garish surroundings when the chance comes."

"Continental cities aren't studies in monochrome," she informed me, slightly stiffly, as if she feared that her lifestyle and worldview were about to come under attack. "They dress in all the colors of the rainbow, including green. They have a beauty of their own—as do the fields. It's silly to be prejudiced against black because of all the unfortunate connotations the color used to have in olden times. Artifical photosynthetics are only black because they soak up all the visible wavelengths in sunlight rather than just a few—it has nothing to do with aesthetics."

As she pronounced the last word, she looked around distastefully at the dingy walls and the dreadful furniture, which seemed unusually ugly even to me in the yellow glow of the lamplight.

"It has everything to do with aesthetics," I said, as mildly as I could, given that it was a sore point. "Aesthetic discrimination is what makes us fully human—it's the foundation-stone of art and morality alike. Without aesthetic judgments, life is robotic, a mere matter of survival. It isn't an accident of choice that black is the color of evil and grief; black *is* darkness and negation. The new photosynthetic systems which have turned the planet black have dressed it in mourning for our sense of beauty, our sense of dignity, and our sense of shame. The blackness of the fields which feed modern cities is for the funeral of everything natural, everything truly alive, everything that was murdered by mankind in the name of stability and comfort. The blackness of the continents is the shadow cast by mechanical civilization."

I was quite sincere in saying all this. My particular greenness might be a very peculiar shade, but it was wholly authentic. I liked to think of it as Lincoln green: Robin Hood's color. I was proud to be an outlaw, after my own trivial fashion, because I considered my side to be the side of light and life.

"If I remember my history rightly, your grandfather was no green zealot," she said, perhaps getting to the real point of her visit at long last. Or perhaps just trying to hold her own in a debate which had turned unexpectedly fervent. "The Creationists were technophiles through and through. Their biotechnology might have preserved Mother Nature's favorite color, but it was revolutionary in every other sense."

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"What do you do for a living, Miss March?" I asked. "How do you earn your daily bread and your preservative nanotech?"

"I'm a robotics engineer," she said. "Hardware rather than soft—I deal with the motion rather than the motivation. Macromachines aren't fashionable, but all the heavy work that smart molecules can't do still has to be done."

"And it pays well enough for you to take holidays beyond the boundaries of your over-organized world," I observed, cynically. "Little ventures into the *beyond,* away from all that blackness and all that bleakness . . . And a chance to stare at all the madmen and malcontents who live in exile from your well-ordered society."

"We don't send our malcontents into exile," she told me, "and we don't have any madmen. Madness is the prerogative of those cowards who insist on growing old." That was cant, but she seemed to believe it, and she seemed to think that what I'd said was sharp enough to warrant that kind of reprisal.

"I shouldn't have said *exile,*" I agreed. "I suppose the islands are more of a refuge, for all those who don't want to die on time. But you civilized people do need a refuge, don't you? You do need an *alternative* to the lifetime Treaty, so that its signatories feel that they have a choice."

"Everyone has a choice, Mr. Drummond," she said, quietly. "I'd rather die with dignity, at the end of an agreed span, knowing that I'll be creating the space for my children to exist, than cling to life knowing that although my body is effectively immortal, my mind is bound to deteriorate." She said it with considerable feeling. I took it for granted that she was maligning me.

"Do you really think my mind has deteriorated?" I asked, in a gentle tone that was meant to dress my iron resentment in a velvet glove. "Do I really seem senile, or mad, to you?"

She wasn't in a mind to bother with polite denials. "I've seen a lot of primitives who do," she told me, quietly. "Men and women much younger than you. It's not an eventuality I'd like to gamble with. Maybe some people can stay sane for two hundred years, but many can't—and no one can hold on to his marbles indefinitely. Until we figure out how to keep our minds in good shape, physical immortality is a limited blessing, and we must take responsibility for its limitation. Necessity as well as politeness demands that we make room for new generations eventually—better that it should be a planned and disciplined process than a ragged patchwork of little wars of succession fought by men whose memories and thought-processes have sclerotized."

"Unlike you," I said, "I relish a gamble with destiny. So did my grandfather. This whole island was a gamble with destiny to him—but you probably know that already, from your history lessons."

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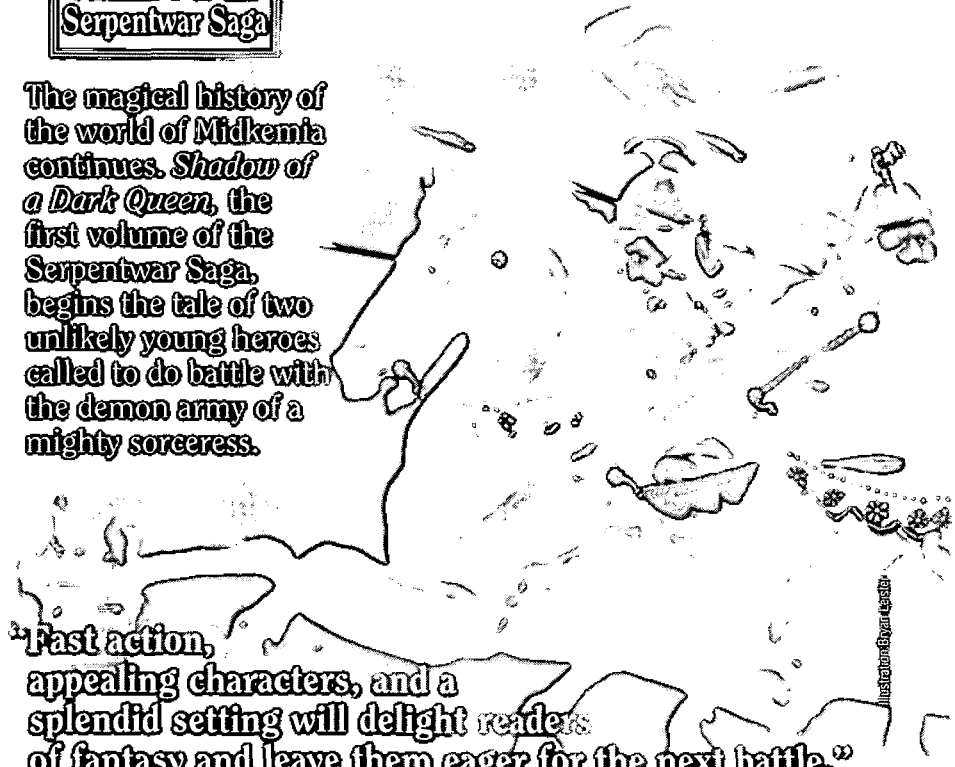

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"No," she said. "All I know is his name. To me, you see, Samuel Morgan Drummond is *ancient* history, like Noah's Ark."

"More like the Garden of Eden," I reminded her. "Perhaps you suspect it of being complete—unlike all the other Edens hereabouts—with its own fabulous and forbidden tree."

"I don't know what you mean," she said, perhaps truthfully.

"It's only a myth," I told her, lightly. "The last of the Creationist legends. You know, of course, that there were *two* special trees in the original Eden, according to *Genesis:* the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It was the second one whose fruit God forbade Adam to eat—and because they ate the fruit of that one, they never got to taste the fruit of the other. After the Fall, of course, they lost their chance—but not forever. There came a day when men could create trees of their own—trees to bear all kinds of wondrous fruit. Some people, of course, think there was a second Fall soon after the time when men first began to make their own trees, but others don't."

"I still don't know what you're talking about," she said. She said it in a faintly aggrieved tone, as if I'd changed the subject which *she* had wanted to discuss.

It occurred to me, belatedly and embarrasingly, that what I'd taken as an attack on me might actually have been a shoring-up of her own wavering conviction.

"How old are you?" I asked, far too bluntly.

"Ninety-one," she told me, without hesitation.

"And when . . .?"

"Ninety-two," she said, without waiting for me to spell it out. "The contract I signed with the new world order is due to end in a matter of months—but I'm not about to defect, Mr. Drummond, not even to the Garden of Eden. It's a place everyone ought to visit once in a lifetime, but it's not where I belong. In my opinion, it's not where any truly *human* being belongs, in the twenty-eighth century."

I left the house early the next morning, while Hilda March was still asleep. She was fully recovered now, but the internal repair work had soaked up almost all of her energy reserves and left her rather weak. She was active enough while she was awake, but she slept long hours and she had a ravenous appetite. The kind of food I lived on seemed to her to be coarse and unedifying, but once she'd overcome her initial apprehension, she'd begun to swallow it down with some enthusiasm. She often asked what she was eating, and listened to my explanations with bewildered fascination; to someone reared on artificially textured and synthetically flavored manna and tissue-culture meat, the contents of my larder were all new and quite unrecognizable.

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I went warily into the maze, as was my habit, but I didn't keep looking back. Even if Hilda March had been a spy and an expert tracker, it would have been almost impossible for her to follow, given the awkwardness of the terrain and the many natural pitfalls lying in wait for the unprepared. I was more afraid of the possibility that she might not have to follow me in person; after all, she only needed to locate the Haeckel tree, and secure a sample of its fruit for analysis. I'd checked my clothes and boots for bugs as best I could, just to be on the safe side, and I'd found nothing, but I couldn't entirely shake off my unease.

I stopped to rest at the top of the ridge, letting the sun dry the sweat from my shirt and brow. It would be sticky in the interior, and I'd be screened from direct sunlight by the thick canopy. The sea was calm, deep blue out beyond the reef and greener within, flecked with foam where it broke over the jagged edges of the dead coral. There wasn't a sail in sight; I was monarch of all I surveyed, unchallengeable lord of the world that my grandfather had made.

When I went on, I collected my customary ration of scratches, but my acquired immunity to the toxins with which the thorns were dressed enabled me to ignore them. I was proud to think that I didn't need any mechanical aid to withstand the chemical effects: that I could do it *myself,* like some modern Mithridates.

I came, in the fullness of time, to stand before the tree.

It was a giant, but it was surrounded by other giants, so it didn't stand out. It was more than four hundred years old now, and it had never stopped growing. It was thirty meters tall and its trunk was eight meters in diameter; how extensive its roots might be I had no way of guessing, but it was easy enough for me to imagine them spreading out beneath the entire island, exploring depths which even the cleverest moleminers had yet to plumb. Like me, it looked old but not decrepit; it was gnarled, but there was no evidence of *decay* in its outer tissues. No creeper grew upon it, neither rust not lichen streaked its bark, no caterpillar fed upon its leaves. The Haeckel tree welcomed parasites, but it did not tolerate them; it sucked them in and devoured them. Birds could perch safely on its branches, and fruit-bats might have roosted in its crown had they been so inclined, but anything which sought more intimate acquaintance with the giant found the tables turned and the biter bit.

So far as I could tell, the vast majority of birds and bats which had made their home on the island scrupulously avoided the fruits hanging on the tree. I presumed that it was the same with the insects. That was inconvenient, but not entirely surprising. Natural selection inevitably worked to produce that effect. In any animal population, however, there are experimenters. Had life no intrinsic inquisitiveness or inherent boldness, no new ecological niche would ever be found. Had it been left to its

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own devices, without my assiduous aid, the tree would still have been able to do its work, tempting the rash and the reckless to collaborate in its endeavors.

All progress depends on the rash and the reckless.

Perhaps the tree would have been able to do its work more quickly, I thought, as I stared up into the rich foliage, if the island *were* subjected to a plague or two, whether of rats or mice or snails—the enrichment of the island's ecology by winged visitors had not yet resulted in any population explosions, perhaps because the fertility of the various recolonizing species was still somewhat impaired by the legacy of the third nuclear war.

The fruit was ripe, as I had expected it to be. The picking was no mere matter of reaching up to pluck it, or using some implement to shake the branches; I had to climb. The lowest branches were a good five meters from the ground but the gnarled trunk offered footholds enough for a nimble man, and I was well-used to their provision. It was easy enough to clamber into the crown, and disappear into the magical microcosm of its foliage. I never contented myself with the closest and easiest fruits; I always took the time to search for the best and most luscious.

The new fruits were all big, the best of them not quite as large as a football, and much the same shape. The last crop had been much smaller, few of the fruits being substantially larger than a tennis ball and most of them being shaped like oblate and slightly irregular spheres. That had been two years before—sometimes, for reasons quite unfathomable, the tree skipped an entire growing season.

There had never been such a marked difference between two successive crops before, and it reinforced my conviction that the tree's progress was gathering pace. At first, I was assured by grandfather's careful records, the tree had fruited every year, but its fruits had been very tiny and varied hardly at all from crop to crop. They were, according to Grandfather's notes, "like bedraggled prunes." The goats to which those early fruits had been fed had often been able to break them down and absorb them like any other food; that never happened nowadays.

My grandfather had gone reluctantly to his grave—reluctantly even by the standards of his own day—without ever seeing anything more than the most trivial effects of what he called "the food of the gods," but his analytical machinery had shown him enough drama at the subcellular level to reassure him that the task was in hand, and would proceed to its culmination if only the tree were given time. I felt privileged to have seen wonders of a kind, even though they were only modest ones, and every new thing delighted me more because I knew how Grandfather would have delighted in it too.

Grandfather appointed me to be the custodian of the Haeckel tree

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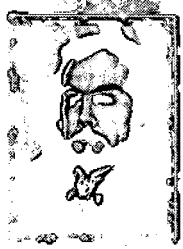

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before I was even born; the seed of my dead father was taken from the banks for that purpose alone. He never told me who my mother was, and I never cared enough to try to trace the history of the donor of the egg. From Samuel Morgan Drummond's point of view, as from mine, I was *his* heir, and his alone—but not, of course, his *only* heir. I buried him beneath the tree, giving his flesh to its roots; in a way, the tree was a truer inheritor of his genius than I was.

I took seven of the fruits. I had come intending to take ten, but their bulk was such that seven was all I could manage—and more than enough for the various purposes I had in mind. I was already certain, of course, that I ought to include Hilda March in my plans. If she were a lying spy, there would be a kind of poetic justice in treating her thus, and if she were *not*. . . .

However firm her own views on the matter might be, I thought that she deserved better than the fate to which she had agreed seventy-some years before, in recognition of the supposed necessities of the new world order.

One fruit, I knew, would be more than sufficient for the meal which I intended to offer my visitor. For my own plate, I picked the fruit of another tree which grew nearby, equally exotic in its way but utterly bland in all its attributes. The fruits were not similar in form, but once sliced and seasoned with something sweeter, the difference would not be noticeable under the kind of uninformed examination to which Hilda March habitually subjected the food I offered her.

I was pricked a dozen times on the way home, although I was more careful than I had been on the way out, but the wounds hardly bled at all and my mood transformed their trivial itching into a thrill of triumph and expectation. For the rest of the day, I busied myself with very ordinary and very uninteresting work—even condescending to spend a few hours repairing the boat, allowing Hilda to assist me in the work of cutting and shaping the new timbers—so as to lull any suspicions which she might have had. Nothing untoward happened; no ship appeared on the horizon, nothing glinted in her eye. My fantasies notwithstanding, her interest in me clearly did not extend so far as lust.

At dinner, she ate the first course that was set before her without any evidence of real enjoyment. I could hardly blame her, given that the meat was poor and the potatoes sour, and that the whole looked like lumpy grey-brown mud. I had taken some trouble to make the dessert much more appealing to the eye and the nose.

"I hope you aren't too full," I said. "I had hoped to tempt you with some of this."

"Not at all," she said.

* * *

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"Are you certain that you've never heard rumor of the Haeckel tree?" I asked, when we had finished our meal and our plates were clean. "It was a common tale at one time—and exactly the kind of fantasy to amuse bored tourists."

"I don't believe so," she said. "Perhaps it would have surfaced later in our itinerary."

"Perhaps," I agreed. "But it would have been a garbled version. I'm the only one who can give you a truly coherent account. I don't mean to imply, of course, that it's any more than a story—a mere legend or flight of fancy—but you might find it intriguing as well as amusing. Do you know who Ernst Haeckel was, by any chance?"

"No," she said.

"In the early days of evolutionary theory, not long after Darwin's death and some time before the first synthesis of the theory of natural selection with the wisdom of biochemical genetics, Haeckel proposed a law whose sole virtue was its succinctness: *ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny*. He had observed that mammalian embryos, in the course of their development, go through a series of stages which seem to echo the evolution of their species. In particular, he was struck by the fact that a mammalian embryo briefly displays gill-like structures which quickly disappear, and which seemed to him to be a structural memory of the ancestral fish from which all other vertebrates are descended.

"The law was, of course, false; an individual does not, in growing from a single cell to a mature adult, recapitulate the entire evolutionary history of its species. The fact that it commanded belief even for a while has far more to do with its aesthetic appeal than its fidelity to actual observation. And yet, it retained some force as a kind of metaphor, for the adult body of a mammal is an eclectic patchwork in which systems evolved by many of its ancestor-species have been selectively conserved, refined, and recombined. The pinnacle of evolutionary achievement, the human brain, is really several systems in one, piled atop one another in a hierarchy of command. There's the stem and spinal column, which regulates a system of autonomic reflexes; then the hind-brain, which is the seat of whatever vestigial instincts remain to us; then a layer which is capable of accommodating sub-conscious learning; and finally, the cerebral lobes, which are the seed-bed of consciousness and reason. There's a loose sense, therefore, in which the brain does recapitulate, in its growth and eventual structure, the pattern of progress which produced it. Are you following me so far?"

"I think so," she said. If she was a spy who'd been properly briefed, all this would be mere ABC, but she gave no evidence of impatience to get on.

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"In the heyday of the Second Industrial—or First Biotechnic—Revolution," I told her, "many genetic engineers became intoxicated with the idea that they had usurped godlike powers. There was an attitude abroad that said that natural selection had brought the pattern of progress to its own terminus, and that men must now carry it forward, creating by clever and careful design rather than by haphazard mutation and trial by fire. But there were some among them—and Samuel Morgan Drummond was of that company—who took the view that the creativity of the human imagination, constrained as it was by utilitarian notions of need and purpose, was a poor replacement for the exuberance of natural selection. According to these men, a world whose future was to be *planned,* however ingeniously, was bound to turn into a stagnant Utopia, full of comfortable and contented people, but guarded and insulated against the fury and fever of change. History has, of course, proved them right."

"I don't think so," Hilda March retorted, evidently feeling that her way of life was under attack again, and still being unreasonably sensitive about the possibility. "We're comfortable enough, and contented enough, if you set the standard by people like yourself and the other inhabitants of these wild islands, but a certain restlessness is intrinsic to human nature, and we're no strangers to ambition and the desire for further discovery. Our world is by no means static, and no one regards it as *finished.* It's full of novelty, still evolving."

"That depends on what you mean by *evolving,*" I pointed out. "In my grandfather's opinion, the novelty of your world is mere cultural and genetic *drift,* not true progress. It's the kind of world in which *true* progress couldn't be entertained, because true progress would make humankind redundant."

"We've adapted men for life in low-gravity environments," she said, quickly. "In time, we'll adapt them to live on the surfaces of other worlds. We've made some progress in the enhancement of intelligence as well as in the conquest of physical aging. I think we're doing a better job than natural selection could, and we're certainly making *true progress.*"

I noticed that she wasn't reluctant to say *we,* although she had already signed away her future.

"Perhaps you're right," I said, mildly. "I'm merely telling you what Samuel Morgan Drummond thought—because that's why, according to legend, he set out to grow a Haeckel tree."

"A tree that would recapitulate its own evolutionary ancestry?" she said, plainly bewildered by the notion.

"No," I said. "A tree which could and might recapitulate, after its fashion, the entire evolutionary ancestry of life on earth . . . and carry that evolution further."

"I don't understand how a tree could possibly do that," she said.

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"The crude version of the legend says that my grandfather designed a tree whose buds produced animals," I said. "According to that account, the early crops were simple invertebrate creatures like nematodes and molluscs—worms, slugs, snails, and suchlike—which grew to maturity hanging from stalks and then struggled free, dropping down to the ground and dispersing. Later crops produced more extravagant wormlike creatures, then fish, then frogs and salamanders, then reptiles and birds . . . what a wonderful sight it would be, don't you think, to see birds growing on the branches like feathered pine-cones, finally breaking free and taking flight? But that, of course, is a layman's understanding of a Haeckel tree, a phantom of the uneducated imagination. . . .

"Have you ever heard the saying *you are what you eat?*"

The abrupt sidestep startled her, but she nodded her head.

"In the common way of thinking, of course, what you eat becomes *you,* in a very crude sense. Your body breaks down your food into elementary chemical building-blocks—amino-acids and so on—and subsequently re-assembles these blocks into structures designed by its own genes. My grandfather devoted the greater part of his life to the development of artificial assimilative systems which could do rather more than that: systems which could appropriate the DNA of consumed material without breaking it down. He developed very simple artificial organisms that were capable of rapid evolution, within a single lifetime, by virtue of their capacity for genetic predation. He produced entities that started life as tiny microscopic worms, but enjoyed spectacular metamorphic careers as they were fed on the flesh of other creatures. Not exactly Haeckel-creatures, but creatures whose ontogeny was phylogenetically promiscuous.

"Grandfather's creatures became what they ate in a very different sense—not a simple and straightforward sense, because they retained the capacity for further change, but a sense that was nevertheless very interesting. They acquired many of the characteristics of the species they consumed, and the best of them—the vast majority either perished or became permanently set in one particular form, according to the logic of natural selection, but a few *did* remain viable—gradually built up a spectacular repertoire of forms and functions. He called them *DeVriesian chimeras.* De Vries was another early evolutionist, who proposed a version of mutation theory."

"I've think I've heard of them," Hilda March admitted. "They were banned, weren't they? They were considered dangerous, because some of them were capable of reproduction even though no two were ever alike."

"A few were capable of vegetative reproduction," I confirmed. "Parthenogenetic self-cloning. In fact, they were far less dangerous than people feared; even the cleverest of them didn't live for long. They were too

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unstable, you see; they wasted themselves recklessly in their metamorphic fervor. Grandfather always thought the problem might be overcome, but when his main lines of research were proscribed he had to divert his efforts into other lines of work. He was strictly forbidden to continue working on his plan to create an artificial organism which would combine the longevity and essential stability of a tree with the experimental fervor of his chimeras: a Haeckel tree, as he elected to call it. His dream was the creation of an organism which could take up the DNA of any and all species, pouring the entire legacy of earthly evolution into a crucible from which anything at all might be eventually brought forth to be tried and tested on the great battlefield of existence—but the dream was sufficiently disturbing to be outlawed.

"All the great genetic engineers of the Second Industrial Revolution were, in the end, restricted by statute and regulation; their godlike ambitions were mummified in bandages of red tape. Their fellow men came to them with commandments written in stone, saying: *thou shalt not make the tree of life*. They were permitted and encouraged to devise many other fruits for men to gorge themselves on, but the *ultimate* fruit they were forbidden to make or to eat. Their fellow men, you see, had already over-eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and had become bitterly dyspeptic."

Wisely, she chose to ignore my sarcastic commentary on the state of the world. "If the layman's image of the Haeckel tree is false," she said, coming instead to the heart of the matter, "what would it *actually* have been like?"

"It wouldn't produce actual creatures instead of fruit," I said. "It would produce fruits of a special kind. You might like to think of them as chimera-fruit, except that they were to apply the logic of *you are what you eat* in reverse. Most fruits, of course, exist in order to be eaten—they're bribes offered to the creatures they feed, so that those creatures will also carry away the seeds of the tree in their bellies, distributing them far and wide. The fruits of the Haeckel tree are—would be—the *ultimate* fruits. They too would be exist only to be eaten, but the seeds they contained, provided that they resisted digestion, would *themselves* become consumers, gifting metamorphic potential to their unsuspecting hosts—or, if you prefer, exercising their own metamorphic potential through the flesh of their hosts. The vast majority of the hosts would derive little benefit, and most would die, at least in the early days of the tree's career . . . but if the most successful could be programmed with an instinct to return to the tree after a suitably testing interval, and give back whatever they had created, whatever they had learned and whatever they had *proved,* then each generation of fruit might be

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cleverer and more adventurous than the last . . . and so, *ad infinitum.* Evolution unlimited, Miss March: the Tree of Life itself."

Her expression was suddenly bleak, and I knew that she understood at least a little better than she pretended—and now understood what it was that she hadn't understood before. Perhaps she had even begun to suspect what I'd done, but her voice was still level, still calm.

"If something like that existed," she opined, "it would be a terrible thing. It would be a threat to all life on earth."

"Hardly," I said. "Birds, bats, and insects would soon learn to avoid its fruit, because any members of their species which did not would automatically be eliminated from the breeding population. The vast majority of its own progeny would perish, and those that did not would return to its bosom. It wouldn't launch a plague of ravenous chimeras upon an unsuspecting world."

"It could reproduce itself, vegetatively," she pointed out.

"Trees live on a more relaxed timetable than human beings," I reminded her. "They're slow to grow, slow to spread. Forests aren't easy to replace once they've been cut down, as the human race once found to its cost. To grow a forest from a single tree would be the work of millennia. No, Miss March, you're quite wrong about the danger posed by such a hypothetical tree, just as your ancestors were wrong about the danger posed by my grandfather's chimeras. Men could live alongside it quite safely and happily, untroubled by its nearness, observing and wondering at its produce. In time, of course—and I'm talking about tens of thousands of years now, or hundreds of thousands—it would produce a new species better by far in unimaginable ways than *Homo sapiens,* but even that's an eventuality no one need fear. After all, the evolution of *Homo sapiens* didn't require the cockroach and the rat to give up their ways of life and become extinct. Contrary to vulgar Darwinian belief, the competition involved in the ceaseless struggle for existence has a great many winners; its variety is potentially infinite, provided only that we don't limit that variety by blind and wicked legislation. Mankind needn't fear supersession, and ought not to murder a Haeckel tree—if any such thing existed—out of horror or fear."

"There are very few people in the world who would agree with you," she said, truthfully.

"That's why I'm here in my private Eden," I reminded her. "A lonely Adam, devoid of Eve and serpent alike, honoring the memory of my grandfather."

"If any such thing were proven to exist," she went on, doggedly, "The people of the world would probably demand its destruction. If they had grounds to believe that one such tree existed in a whole vast forest, and

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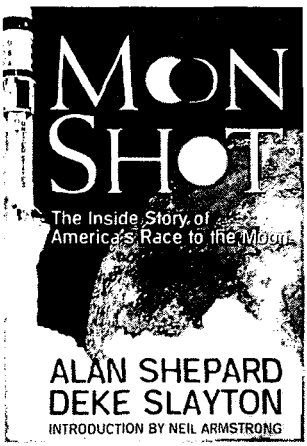

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couldn't tell which one it was, they might well burn the whole forest down."

"If even one such thing were known to exist," I told her, coldly, "no one could ever know for sure that it had been killed, even if they devastated an island or a continent in order to make sure. No one could ever know how far its seed had been spread, or how far its roots extended deep within the earth. Its progress might be interrupted, or set back a step or two, but it could never be *stopped.* The tide of *true progress* can't be *turned back,* Miss March—not permanently. You might as well try to turn back the tide of time itself."

She wanted to have the last word, but she couldn't formulate it properly. After trying for thirty seconds or so, she admitted defeat. All she could eventually contrive to say was: "I feel rather strange."

It was a comment more apt than most of the ready alternatives.

Although I had to devote almost all of my attention to Hilda March in the days which followed, I fed the fruit to two dozen goats and thirty fowl. Then I set them all loose, and chased them into the interior. That was a simple precautionary measure; I knew that someone might come looking for the woman within the next few days, even if she were exactly what she claimed to be. Hilda herself I removed to one of Grandfather's inner sanctums, deep within the bosom of the hill.

The helicopter arrived two days later, with ten men aboard. I explained that I'd seen no one, but I gave them permission to search the island as assiduously as they could. They set off with determination, but it was only a matter of hours before they began trailing back to the house. Their wounds were very slight, but their internal technology could only do so much in damping down their reaction to the thorn-poisons, and they were in some discomfort. I applied some external palliatives, oozing sympathy the while, assuring them that they would be in no mortal danger were they to carry on—but the men of the modern world have grown unused to petty discomforts. They're all cowards at heart.

I didn't ask the leader of the search-party many questions about the person they were looking for, lest I should arouse their suspicions, but I did ask how old she was. Anyone would have done the same. He confirmed that she was contracted to die in a few months time under the provisions of her lifetime Treaty, but pointed out that they were obliged to search for her nevertheless. I was fairly certain that he was sincere; they really *were* trying to rescue her, not tracking down a renegade suspected of welshing on her deal with the new world order. I wished them the best of luck with their search when they left, having found nothing.

Hilda remained alive for more than a week. Perhaps that was due

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entirely to her internal technology, but I couldn't help feeling that perhaps—just *perhaps*—she might have been better off without her protective nanotech. The molecular machines were programmed to fight against any disturbance of their environment, and that included the effects of the seeds which possessed her as soon as she had consumed the fruit of the Haeckel tree. There was no way of knowing what might have become of her flesh, or of her many-layered brain, had kindly civilization refrained from filling her with stubborn resistance.

Her ontogeny showed no outward sign of recapitulating her phylogeny while she changed, but most of the changes were internal, invisible to my inquisitive eyes. I hoped that she might find a voice again, in order to give me some indication of what might be going on—indeed, I hoped that her intelligence might be augmented rather than suppressed, and that she might awake from her second coma far more exuberantly than she had awakened from her first—but we were both out of luck. It was far too much to expect, given that this was my first experiment with a human subject; the hazards of fate are never as generous as that.

One day, I firmly believe, one of the children of the tree will speak to the world with the voice of a prophet, and will have much to say—but the time is not yet.

I made my usual encrypted record of the changes that did take place, as any dutiful scientist would have done, but I knew that the record would not be valuable, and that Hilda would not be returning to the tree. I did everything I could to keep her alive as long as possible. Although she couldn't hear me, I urged her and pleaded with her to make what efforts she could to come to terms with what was happening to her, but she couldn't respond.

I suffered several severe fits of remorse over what I had done. I called myself a murderer a dozen times over, and refused to excuse myself on the grounds that she would otherwise have wasted her life, her health, and her potential. Nor did I think myself any less guilty on the account that she would have sanctioned the destruction of the Haeckel tree, and would probably have done everything in her power to achieve that end had she come to believe in its existence. She was not, after all, capable of understanding that the tree's life was infinitely more precious than the life of any merely human being; it was stupidity which would have moved her—and perhaps had moved her, if she really was a UN spy—rather than malice.

With the passage of time, though, my bad conscience eased, and I was able to look at things more calmly. I buried her carefully, where she would never be found, and then I set out to make what study I could of the other creatures I had given to the avid fruit. Several were still healthy, and I knew that one or two at least would eventually return to

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the tree, but when I came to tabulate the results of the experiment, they seemed remarkably poor by comparison with my optimistic hopes.

A tree's time is not ours, and evolutionary progress is slow, no matter how it may be achieved or cunningly assisted, but with every year that passes, I become more conscious of the threat of my own mortality. I cannot resist the conviction that I shall not live to catch even the merest glimpse of the promised land that this island will one day become.

I now believe that I have been far too cautious in reintroducing vertebrate species to the island. I must make every effort to import many more. I must have monkeys and rodents, perhaps even snakes. The risk of destabilizing the island's ecology must have receded by this time, and if one of the imported species does run riot and become a plague, I shall simply have to tackle the problem and solve it. Like the birds and the bats, the new populations will doubtless become circumspect, but the tree needs them, desperately. . . .

No, that isn't true; the *tree* is self-sufficient. What I told the woman is true—no power on earth can destroy it now. In the long run, even *I* am irrelevant to its fortunes, and anything I feel a desperate need to do is for *my* benefit and edification.

The tree is, after all, the Tree of Life itself; it stands outside the empire of man, utterly unconcerned with the knowledge of good and evil or the follies of temptation.

Two weeks after the helicopter left, the fishermen from Bahu came to Moro, according to their habit. We had a banquet on the beach; they provided the fish and the palm wine while I provided the meat and the fruit. The fruit was, of course, quite innocuous.

"It's a pity that that woman who was lost from the tourist boat didn't wash up on your island," one of the girls said to me, as we lay under the stars with full bellies, caressing one another according to a fashion that the people of the night-dark continents abandoned long ago. "She might have thought it paradise and decided to stay."

"I'm glad that she didn't," I told her. "I value my solitude too much. I was put upon the earth to do my grandfather's work, and it's best that I do it alone."

"No man should be alone," she said, teasingly. "A man without friendship and love is hardly a man at all, and might as well be made of wood."

"We are what we eat," I told her, warmly and with genuine affection, "and *I* dine on hope and glory, while common men cannot." ●

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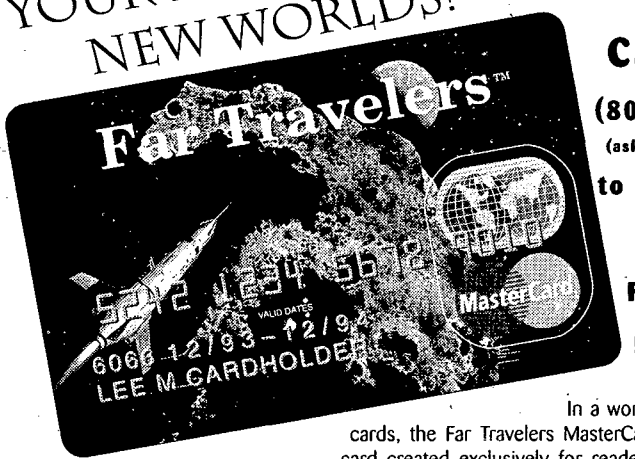

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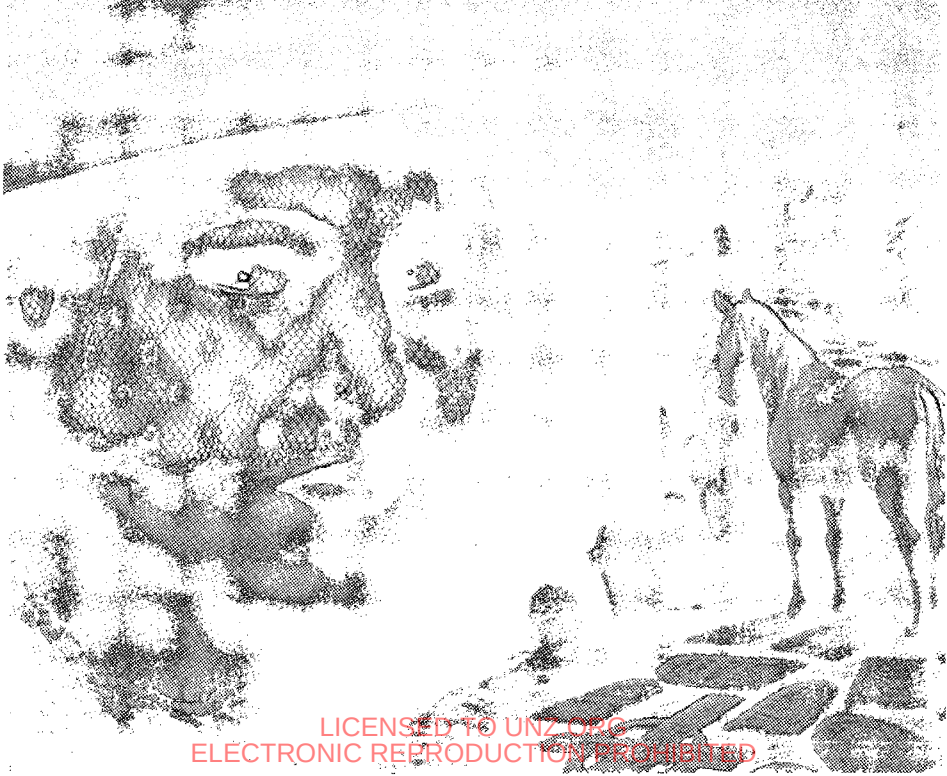
Holly Wade

LA PUCELLE

"La Pucelle" is the author's second sale to *Asimov's*. The story was written in one night at the 1992 Clarion West. Ms. Wade is currently working on her first novel.

Illustration by Pat Morrissey



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The ferryman, without ceremony, deposited her trunk and a dozen coffins on the pier, and pushed off again before she could stagger to the gate. Valcassil's wall loomed above her, rough and grey from centuries of holding back the sea. Within the gate, splintered, oily, black as the pier that groaned and swayed beneath her, lay a door not much taller than she; and beside that, a frayed rope and a sign crudely lettered "DEAD-BELL." She hesitated. Only the dead passed through Valcassil's gate. But she felt the sea at her back, endlessly wide, endlessly deep, and longed to be safely enclosed from it. She pulled hard on the rope; the bell tolled within, muted by the gate and by the roar of the waves.

A moment later, the door groaned open, and a thin old wet-faced man squinted up at her. Swathed in rain-soaked black, still ill from the rough crossing from Dover, she knew she was a frightful sight.

"So you're the one?" he shouted over the roar of the waves. His voice was high and hoarse. She might be the first living being he had spoken to in years.

She nodded, unused to her own voice.

"I'm the sexton. Come along," he said. "The sea wants in. All this water's bad for the graves."

She stepped into the dead city, catching a glimpse of two far towers through the wet black veil that hung over her face. The sexton glanced at the trunk and the dozen coffins, tutted, and swung the door shut.

Now she was safe. She drew a deep breath—and choked on the smell of corruption she'd drawn into her nose and throat. The sexton caught her as her knees gave way, and pulled her back up sharply.

"Come now, come now. It's only bad here by the wall. Further in to the city, you'll hardly notice it."

"What is it?" She pressed her hand against her nose and breathed quickly, shallowly, through her dry mouth.

"The dead, Miss. The ones that haven't yet gone to bone."

He led her to a white mare and helped her mount. She had ridden only once before, when she was still a small child; and might now have felt fear, but didn't. The white mare seemed infinitely patient and kind, and stood still as she negotiated the sidesaddle through yards of wet petticoats and skirt. The sexton took the reins and led the way through the narrow street. She swayed with the mare's gait, and sat tall despite the smell and cold and rain, concentrating hard on the view over the mare's graceful head.

"What's your name?" the sexton said.

"Babylon."

"Not really?"

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"Mother named me after the Harlot Babylon in the Revelation of Saint John the Divine."

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "Coo! Why'd she want to do that for?"

She stared down at him, silent. Rain dripped from the tip of his nose, making him seem quite silly.

"None of my business. Got you, Miss."

He shrugged and turned his back, and they continued their journey. The rain poured down, dripping from the brim of her hat, soaking through the veil and her black faille dress. It gleamed on the toes of her kid boots, and on her gloves. She gathered wet handfuls of the mare's mane and felt she was grasping fine seaweed.

"Always interested," the sexton continued, over his shoulder, "in the fads of the gentry. Why they'd name their daughter Babylon. Why they'd ship her off to the cemetery."

"Didn't they tell you anything about me?"

"Just that you were gentry, and a kid, and to clean up the house for you."

"Oh!" He didn't know. For a moment, an alien joy, sharp as a hunger pang, beat within her heart. Then she realized that even if the sexton didn't know, she would still be the abomination her mother had kept locked in the windowless attic room. God would still despise her. The sexton, when he found her out, would despise her, too.

And she would live and die in this cemetery. With hopeless eyes, she stared through the nearly opaque streams of rain. The narrow street rose up a slight grade; it wasn't cobbled, but paved with headstones. Above her, she saw row after row of wooden coffins nailed to the slanted roofs.

"Do people live in these houses?" she asked, horrified, and certain that she would have to live in one of them.

"Not now. They're what you'd call ossuaries, Miss. All full of bones."

"Which house is mine?"

"The big house, Miss. Further up."

Ahead, barely visible among the clusters of abandoned houses and public buildings, the green spire of a church and a monstrous granite obelisk rose to the thick grey sky.

"How old are you, Miss? If you don't mind my asking."

"Seventeen," she said.

"Seventeen, and shipped off to the cemetery. Well, if I could understand the ways of the world, I wouldn't be a bloody grave-digger, would I?"

Ahead, something wooden groaned and gave way. A flash of white bones and dark splinters slid down a roof in a cascade of water and crashed in a heap on the street. Babylon flinched back on the saddle and

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clutched the mare's mane more tightly. *And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city. . . .*

"Oh, don't you mind that, Miss. It happens all the time. Those wooden coffins tend to rot. One good downpour, and they burst like brown paper. More work for me, but not everybody can afford copper."

Delicately, the white mare stepped over the bones. Babylon looked back. The skull stared at her as its empty eye sockets filled with rain.

The houses thinned, gradually giving way to a circular field of tombstones and mausoleums. In the middle of the field stood the church; to the left, the obelisk; to the right, a house almost exactly like the one she'd left in London, with a mansard roof and railed widow's walk. Even so, two coffins of patined copper clung to the slope of the roof.

"Almost home," said the sexton, carefully guiding the white mare through the thicket of grave-markers. "This was the first cemetery. The one from the old days, when Valcassil was still a city."

"Yes," she said. Brilliant green flashed in the corner of her eye, and she turned. She saw nothing but grey and black and patina—the obelisk, the sky, the spire and the twin coffins. Not until then did her last hope die—she hadn't seen a single tree, flower, or blade of grass.

The sexton had a wife, a silent old Frenchwoman who took charge of Babylon when they reached the house. She led Babylon up three flights of stairs, to a bedroom with a fire in the hearth; laid out an old wool dressing-gown, and crept away.

Alone, Babylon paced before the fire, stripping off hat and veil and gloves. Her black hair was wet through and through. She unpinned the crown of braids and let them fall across her shoulders. Leaning against the mantel, she stared into the looking-glass, and touched her forefingers to the two circular white scars just below her hairline.

And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

She went to the door and turned the key in the lock, and felt more at home.

In front of the fire, she unbuttoned her dress and stepped out of it. She stripped off layers of petticoat, and struggled with the front fastenings of her corset. As that second ribcage fell, she breathed deeply and bent to unlace her boots. They were stiff with rain, and she could barely pull them off her feet. She shed her chemise, and her heavy black stockings and garters, and hid them beneath the heap of wet clothing on the carpet. Then she loosened her plaits and waved out her hair. It lay like wet snakes against her bare back. Her skin was damp and red, and though she turned and turned, she couldn't get warm.

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She ran her puckered, wet fingertips down her chest and belly, stopping short above her pubic hair. She glanced down, and quickly drew her hands away from her body.

Harlot.

She had done it for years before her mother discovered it. Had she known it was wrong, she would never have done it at all. She should have known it was wrong, because it felt so lovely. But the kings of the earth hadn't committed fornication with her. She had committed fornication with herself.

Here is Mother, severe in black, yanking back the covers, exposing Babylon's nakedness, her hastily-closed legs—grasping her wrists, dragging her from the bed to the floor—"Who has taught you this vice?" "Nobody, Mother, nobody, nobody!"—slapping her, ordering her to kneel, to pray for forgiveness. Here is Babylon, weeping with shame and terror, cowering in her nakedness, trying to pray, trying to raise her voice over the voice of Mother, who shouts:

"How much she hath glorified herself, and lived deliciously, so much torment and sorrow give her: for she saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow. Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning!"

The knock on the door startled her.

"A moment, if you please," she called, her voice higher than normal. She quickly put on the dressing gown and threw the wet veil over her head. Then she hurried to the door, unlocked it, opened it.

The sexton's wife came in, carrying a tray.

"Tea, Mademoiselle?"

She nodded and stepped aside. The old woman set the tray on the table, crossed the room, and pulled open the heavy purple velvet curtains. Rain-bleached sunlight poured in and paled the fire.

"It has begun to brighten," said the sexton's wife.

When the old woman left, Babylon cautiously crossed to the window. She squinted down at the wet city, now glittering like mica in the sunlight, the obelisk bright as a silver needle. The sexton led the white horse, now hitched to a low wagon, out across the field—going back to fetch her trunk and the coffins.

As he disappeared into one narrow street, from another a youth mounted on a black horse raced into full sunlight. The horse wore neither saddle nor bridle, and its reckless speed made Babylon wonder if it were wild. The boy leaned against the horse's neck, his black hair seemingly part of its mane. As they galloped toward the obelisk, Babylon tensed. At the last possible moment, they swerved and galloped three times round the base before slowing to a nervous canter. The youth raised himself up, and spread out his arms as if to embrace the sky. Ragged

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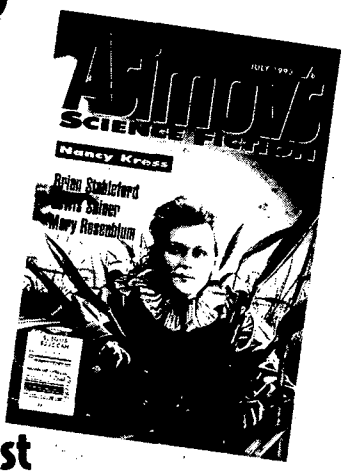

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black hair rayed about his pale face and over his shoulders. He wore black trousers and boots, and a shirt of vivid green. Was it his shirt, then, that she had glimpsed as she rode to the house?

No, not his shirt, but his eyes, which now turned to her, which stared right at her, as he shouted in exultation:

"La Pucelle!"

She quickly drew away from the window, her heart beating hard in her chest, and sank down to the floor. There she knelt, long after the sound of horse's hooves had faded away.

"I have no son," the old woman said.

"The young man, then," said Babylon.

"There is no young man."

"But there is! I saw him. Below."

The old woman stared at her intently, as if appraising her anew. Then she shrugged and said, "There is no young man."

Frustrated, Babylon paced to the window and stared out at the span of graves.

"What," she said, "is La Pucelle?"

"Who."

"Pardon?"

"La Pucelle is a who, not a what."

"Who, then?"

"La Pucelle is the Maid. The Virgin."

Babylon turned and gazed at the old woman. "Do you mean Mary?"

The old woman smiled, showing her bottom teeth.

"Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils. . . ." When she read, she read in her mother's voice. She read in her mother's voice, and she wept in her own.

She heard other voices down the hall—the sexton's, and the sexton's wife's. Quietly, she put down the Bible, rose from her knees, crept to the door, and pressed her ear against it.

"A ghost," said the sexton.

"Not a ghost," said the sexton's wife.

"She is one of God's holy fools."

"No. You know what she is."

He began to argue, when the old woman hissed.

"Hush," she said. "She's listening at the door."

Babylon drew away quickly, frightened. The old woman was as keen as her mother.

But otherwise unlike.

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"Why do you sit here all day, with the curtains closed and that veil over your face?" she asked. "This house is yours, Mademoiselle. Let it open to you."

"I need only one room to pray," Babylon said.

"And what do you pray?"

Babylon's face burned with shame. All her life, she had been told that she was beyond hope of salvation. Why, then, should this one vice matter so much?

Yet it did, and she had not been able to resist it. Late into every night, over and over, she committed it with guilty delight. And every day she spent in misery, praying for forgiveness. But she dared not confess this to the sexton's wife. Instead, she said, "That God may some day hear me."

The old woman shook her head. "Explain."

"All beings may talk to God," she said, "and He will listen to all but Babylon. She alone He will not hear."

"Did a priest tell you this thing?"

"My mother did."

The old woman sat in silence, seeming to consider. At last she rose up slowly, her joints cracking. "Eh bien, since you pray for the impossible, you might as well go out for a walk."

"May I?" Babylon asked, astonished.

"Certainement."

"But my mother never let me—"

"Understand, Mademoiselle. Your mother has buried you. In her mind, you are dead. Alors, you can do whatever you want."

"Oh." She lowered her head and stared down at her clasped hands. A cold, distant sadness crept through her body.

"What do you want, Mademoiselle?" the sexton's wife asked after a moment.

Babylon shook her head. *I am dead. Therefore, I am free.*

"Nothing at all," she said.

Three days passed before she finally went out of the house. Yet she went out enclosed in hat and veil and gloves, and walked hesitantly, expecting any moment to be sharply called back.

She gradually understood that there was no longer a reason to be watched or restrained. The dead lay all around her—beneath her feet, above her on the rooftops. She wandered through the field of graves, searching for a single blade of green. Surely, somewhere, a bird must have dropped a seed. But there weren't any birds in Valcassil. Not even seagulls flew above the island, though they circled around it, just outside the city wall.

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And the young man who had called her La Pucelle? Not a king of the earth, he, but a ghost.

Not a ghost, but a demon.

Not a demon, but a dream.

It was he she dreamed of as she fornicated with herself.

One clear April morning, she rode out on the white mare. Sunlight soaked into her black clothes and warmed her. She closed her eyes, and listened to the slow clatter of hooves on the headstone streets.

"Wander as you will," she said, patting the mare's neck. "It doesn't matter to me."

Up and down Valcassil's streets, in and out of shadow, the mare carried her, as the breeze fanned her skirts and her veil. In sunlight, the dead city seemed alive with blue and white and copper. Babylon tasted these colors, though what she longed for she couldn't find.

Here is Babylon, thirteen years old, allowed in the garden for her birthday. Once a year they let her out; but this year, the garden is different, because she is different. Here are her eyes, drinking, gulping, nothing but green, green, green. Here she pulls off her gloves and runs her bare hands over the mossy stones. Here she lifts her veil, and rubs her face against the grass. She reaches out her tongue and tastes it. She tastes green. She strokes the leaves of the trees, and feels the trunks, her fingers catching on the bark. She longs to strip off her clothes and break out of the imprisoning corset, to feel the green against her skin. Here, half-delirious, she begins to unfasten the buttons on her dress—

—and here is Mother, catching her, slapping her—

"La Pucelle!"

Babylon opened her eyes. Green filled them—the green of his shirt, the green of his eyes. He stood not far down the street, smiling at her.

Harlot.

She reined in the white mare.

"Have you come to meet me, La Pucelle?" He began to walk toward her. Even as he passed beneath shadows, he seemed to radiate the warmth of sun-soaked earth. She trembled with fear—of him, and of her own fierce want.

Abomination.

She jerked the reins and turned the mare.

"Where are you going, La Pucelle?" he called.

Letting out a breath like a sob, she urged the mare to gallop and didn't look back.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven . . . our Father, who art in Heaven. . . ."

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Our Father, impossibly distant in the sky, unseeable, unknowable . . . Our Father, who presses his hands against his ears and will not hear me. . . .

"Our Father," she said angrily between set teeth, "who art in Heaven—"

"Pardon, Mademoiselle?" said the sexton's wife.

Babylon started, instantly guilty.

"I was—"

"Praying, yes." The sexton's wife gathered up Babylon's supper dishes and put them on a tray. "What were you praying for *this* time?"

"I don't know." She rose, and walked to the hearth, and glanced in the mirror. Her face seemed like a shadow behind the veil.

"Tell me," she said, turning to the sexton's wife.

"Tell you?"

"Tell me—tell me your name."

"Angelique," said the sexton's wife.

They gazed at each other in silence.

"What," Angelique said at last, "did you really wish to ask me, Mademoiselle?"

Babylon blushed. "That—that was all."

Angelique bowed slightly, picked up the tray, and left the room. Babylon turned the key in the lock, and listened until she could no longer hear the old woman's footsteps.

Here are voices outside the attic door. Her mother: "We are Christians now." Her father: "But consider heredity, my dear. The Blood of the Lamb cannot wash away the blood of the line." Her mother: "I will not tolerate an abomination." Her father: "Perhaps we *are the abomination."*

"Tell me what I really am," said Babylon.

The next time she rode out, she whispered to the mare, "Take me back to the place where we saw him."

Instead, the mare picked her way carefully through the field of graves and brought Babylon to the obelisk. Ignoring reins and Babylon's protests, the mare circled round and round the obelisk.

"Come now, girl. Come now," Babylon said irritably. "You'll make us both dizzy, if you don't leave off."

Suddenly, the hoofbeats doubled behind her. She turned to look, and saw him. He rode the wild black horse, still without saddle or bridle. He smiled as he rode up beside her. His pale skin seemed almost silver in the diffused pearl light.

"Bonjour, La Pucelle," he said. "I hoped you might ride today."

"I'm not La Pucelle," she said. Her voice trembled, and she blushed—yet not for shame.

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"Who, then?"

"My name is Babylon."

The young man made a face. "Please. That is a terrible name."

"And what," she said defensively, "is your name?"

"Nothing so clumsy as—nothing so clumsy as that."

"What do you want?" she demanded.

He smiled. "To give. And to take."

He reached down his hand and brought it back up full of leafy green starred with tiny, gold-tongued purple flowers. Babylon's eyes widened to take in the colors. Without thinking, she reached out her hand. He gave her the bundle of flowers and leaves.

"Where did you find these?" she breathed.

"They grow here, at the base of the obelisk. If you didn't wear that veil, you would certainly have seen them. Do you like them, La Pucelle?"

"Yes."

"I give them to you, then. And now, may I take?"

She glanced at him, her heart pounding. "What do you want?"

"This," he said, reaching over and jerking away her veil. Her hat tumbled to the ground, exposing her forehead and the two circular scars. She cried out, but already he had spurred his horse. One arm flung out, his hand holding the fluttering veil as he galloped away.

"That's belladonna," the sexton exclaimed, snatching the plant away from her as if it were a serpent. "Deadly nightshade, Miss. You don't want to be pulling that up. It's poison."

Babylon strangled a cry as he tossed the bundle of green and purple and gold onto the fire. He wiped his hands on his pants and stalked away.

Her eyes blurred as the plant sizzled and wilted in the flames. Angelique came up beside her. She, too, stared into the fire.

She said, "The maidens of this island, long ago, used it in their magic. On Beltaine, May Eve, they would dip a broom-straw into it, and stroke it between their legs."

"Why?" Babylon was shocked that Angelique would speak of such things, but fascinated nonetheless.

"So that the antlered god would come to them, and lie with them."

"Lie with them?"

Angelique smiled. "What your maman calls 'fornication.' "

Babylon's breath caught in her throat. "And who is the antlered god?"

"The intended of La Pucelle."

At dusk, she slipped quietly from the house and ran toward the obelisk. She had stuck a straight pin into her left-hand glove; a thin line of silver cold lay against her palm, pricking her slightly but not painfully. When

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she reached the obelisk, she laughed, startled and exultant. All around the base curled sweet green tendrils of belladonna. The purple of the flowers matched the twilight. Their golden tongues burned like tiny flames. She knelt down, drew off her gloves, and ran her hands gently over the moist flowers, breathing deeply in awe and delight. She hardly dared pick any—it seemed a shame to so uproot a living thing—yet *he* had. He had offered them to her. And she feared that if she didn't gather them now, the sexton would find them and destroy them all.

Poison.

Yet pleasure.

Yet pleasure *was* poison.

Yet the maidens of the island, too, had wanted. She was not the only one, after all.

She pulled up a bunch and pinned it to her petticoat. Guiltily, she raised her eyes to the darkening sky, to the One who had condemned her. Yet all she could see was a single star, like a bright drop of dew, resting against the tip of the obelisk.

Babylon leaned against the wrought-iron railing enclosing the widow's walk, and flipped open her sketchbook. Below lay Valcassil, and beyond, the English Channel, and beyond that, Dover. Though the sky was clear blue, with only a few clouds like snipped locks of fine white hair, the sun wasn't high enough to warm her. Nonetheless, since the day the young man had given her the belladonna, she hadn't worn hat, gloves or veil.

Across the way rose the church spire, scaled in patined copper. At the top of the spire, St. George and the dragon twisted against each other, muscles straining as sinuous tail wrapped around cleft club. Scales and smooth skin gleamed, as if beneath a sheen of sweat. Babylon was beginning to understand the nature of the tension in human and serpentine bodies that resolved in the corner of her vision. It was much different than the tension she saw when she looked at it directly.

A wind rose up, and insisted upon curling back the page, knocking the edge against her charcoal, jagging her lines. Insisting, it didn't listen to her complaints.

The wind was English and implacable. It blew loose strands of her hair in her eyes, and ran its fingers against the soft skin of her wrists. The wind spoke of inevitabilities. It reminded her that tonight, Angelique and the sexton would leave Valcassil for their holiday in Dover. It reminded her that tonight was Beltaine.

She glanced obliquely at the wind, and found that it carried demons and angels in its translucent filaments. The angels were white and gold and pale blue; the demons, red and black and silver. They seemed to hold the same congress as Saint George and the dragon, and paid no attention

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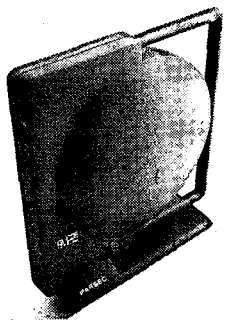

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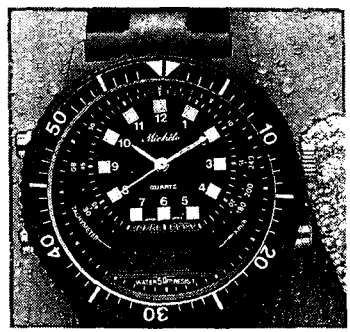

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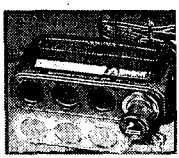

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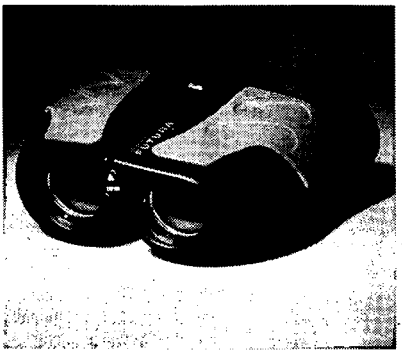

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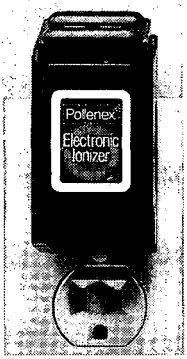

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to her. Holding the page flat with her left hand, she rapidly sketched them and flipped over the next page.

Vanity satisfied, the wind dipped down and swept through the narrow streets.

Babylon thought of tonight, and tightly closed her eyes.

A latch snapped behind her, followed by footsteps. Angelique, dressed in traveling clothes, walked to Babylon's side, leaned against the railing, and glanced at her sketch.

"How many times have you drawn that spire?"

"It's a different spire every time."

Across the distance, over the rooftops, the dead-bell echoed.

"Please don't go," Babylon said, suddenly panicked. "Not tonight. Please wait until tomorrow."

Angelique sighed. "Why are you so afraid? Nothing will hurt you here."

"I don't want to be alone."

"Then let us pray against your loneliness."

"No," said Babylon.

"Don't you pray any more, Mademoiselle?"

She didn't answer.

"Were you baptized?" Angelique asked.

"The water burned from my forehead."

Angelique turned Babylon's face toward her and pressed her forefingers against the circular scars. "A child born with horns." She let her hands fall back to her sides. "I will leave you to your sketching. The ferry waits."

"No!" She dropped her sketchbook and clutched Angelique's arm. "Tell me first—"

"Yes?"

"Tell me what I am."

Angelique hesitated, and her keen eyes scanned the sky. "You are one ruled not by God in heaven."

"But tell me what I *am*."

Angelique shook her head and seemed about to turn away, but Babylon held her.

"Why are you afraid of me?" Babylon cried. "Is my mother right, after all?"

"Pauvre petite, I am not afraid of you. I am afraid *for* you. Human children are not born with horns. Human women do not give birth to horned children. Your maman denied her nature. I am afraid you will make the same mistake."

"But what *am* I, if not human? Please, Angelique—tell me what I am."

Angelique smiled and briefly closed her eyes. At last, she said, "A fey creature, Mademoiselle. A being of the earth."

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* * *

Angèlique and the sexton were gone. Babylon watched until she could no longer see the ferry. Then she lifted her skirts and climbed over the wrought-iron railing. Carefully, she eased down the roof to the copper crypts. They radiated a mellow warmth. She sat, then lay down, between them, and stared up into the sky.

High on the roof of the house, tipped up to the sky, she felt the roll and the pull of the earth beneath her.

She awoke to night.

Above her, the sky draped like deep-blue velvet stitched with silver, the full moon pendant over St. George and the dragon.

Carefully, she crawled up the roof and grasped the wrought-iron railing. She pulled herself up and over, and sank down with a shudder. Late, the image came to her of sliding off the roof like bones from the burst coffin, wheeling in the air, shattering against the headstone pavement. Then she would be dead in more than her mother's mind.

"Babylon the great is fallen," she said. She stopped, not breathing, and felt her words. They lifted her to her feet. She threw back her head and raised her arms to the dead city, and cried out, "Babylon the great is fallen! Yet *I* live!"

Beneath the house, the earth seemed to shift, as if raising up arms to embrace her. She ran down into the house, opened the door to her room, and crossed to the vase of belladonna that waited on the mantle.

"Beloved," she called softly. "Can you hear me? Do you truly wait for me?"

Silence answered her.

She reached up to brush a lock of hair from her forehead. Her hand struck something small and sharp and hard.

"Oh," she whispered.

She felt the spiraled points that rose just below her hairline. She rushed to the hearth, and peered into the looking-glass.

Two little black horns had replaced the circular white scars.

Abomination, screamed her mother.

La Pucelle, whispered her beloved.

Voices rose to her open window, singing to her, calling to her, drawing her to the casement. *La Pucelle, redeemer of the stony soil, horned bride of the antlered god, your bridegroom waits for you, his desire is for you.*

Below, in the darkness, a fire leapt and danced. She drew away from the window and paced the room, shivering. Her mother's voice screamed to her *There is only one God, and He will* never *listen to you.*

She gingerly reached up and touched her horns, and shivered with inexpressible delight.

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La Pucelle, he said, *come to me.*

Abomination.

La Pucelle.

Harlot.

The bride.

"And who am I?" she said, as she stripped off her dress, her petticoats; as she broke open the cage of her corset; as she stripped off chemise and boots and stockings; as she waved down her hair. "Who am I, that I could redeem?"

She touched her horns, her face, her hair. She crushed belladonna flowers between her fingertips, and raised them up to breathe their wet scent. She slid her hands down her smooth white body, and ran her fingertips through her pubic hair, and further. Her fingers slid into the wetness between her legs.

The antlered god is the intended of La Pucelle.

Downstairs, the clock struck midnight. Outside the house, the voices rose up to a high, sweet pitch.

He intends.

She said, "I intend."

To give.

"And to take."

She went down the three flights of stairs. Delirium burned at the tip of every nerve.

The white mare waited outside. She mounted her and rode astride, pressing down against the mare's spine, leaning her head against the mare's neck, her black hair spilling over the mare's white coat, her pale fingers twined in the mare's white mane.

The white mare's hooves rang like cymbals on the headstones.

The voices sang: *Blessed is the May Queen, blessed is the horned bride.*

Her eyes half-closed, she leaned into the mare's swaying gait. The midnight air tasted sweet and warm on her tongue. She thought of green. She thought of her intended, her beloved. When the white mare halted, she slowly raised herself up.

The obelisk stood before them, transformed, thick with twining belladonna vines.

Warm hands grasped her and lifted her from the mare. They set her gently on the ground. He stood before her, as naked as she, his ragged black hair spilling over his shoulders. Where she had the horns of a faun, he bore the antlers of a hart. They seemed to catch and hold the moon.

"La Pucelle," he said. "Welcome."

"Beloved."

Behind them, a bonfire blazed. What lay beyond it, she couldn't see.

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"No, La Pucelle. Look at me. And tell me if you consent to give, and tell me if you consent to take."

His long white body gleamed in the moonlight. She laid her hands upon it and touched, feeling his smoothness slide beneath her palms, twin to her own smoothness. She stroked his chest, fingertips lingering at his nipples. With great hesitancy, her hands eased down to his penis. She drew in a deep breath, and touched it.

Warmth. Soft skin over hard flesh. Wetness. The wetness was so like her own, there could be nothing distressing about it.

Nothing distressing about his long white torso. Nothing distressing about his slender, strong arms. Nothing distressing about his beautiful, fey face, or his smile as she stroked him.

She smiled in return.

"Will you consent, La Pucelle?"

She laughed, and grasped his hand. She drew him, running, toward the blazing fire, the sweet smoke, the shadows that undulated beyond. With the feel of flying, she leapt over the fire with him. Their feet touched the new damp moss at the same moment. The voices rose in jubilation as she laid him down on their marriage-bed.

All around, the trees and flowers, the grasses and mosses, burst and burgeoned through crumbling stone. ●

—for Brad

SPECIAL GRAVITATION

for Marilyn

Newton was wrong.
I know, for I have multiplied your 130 pounds by my 150
and divided the product
by the square
of the 2000 miles between us,
but the resultant 5.8707
times10 to the -21 pounds
does not correctly describe the force
that holds us together. Clearly
Newton should have multiplied
rather than divided.

—David Lunde

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R. V. Branham's stories have appeared in *Back Brain Recluse, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Asimov's, Full Spectrum 3,* and *Magicats 2.* Mr. Branham recently moved from Southern California to the Pacific Northwest, where he divides his time between fiction and journalism projects and working as an interpreter for a social services agency.

Illustration by Steve Cavallo

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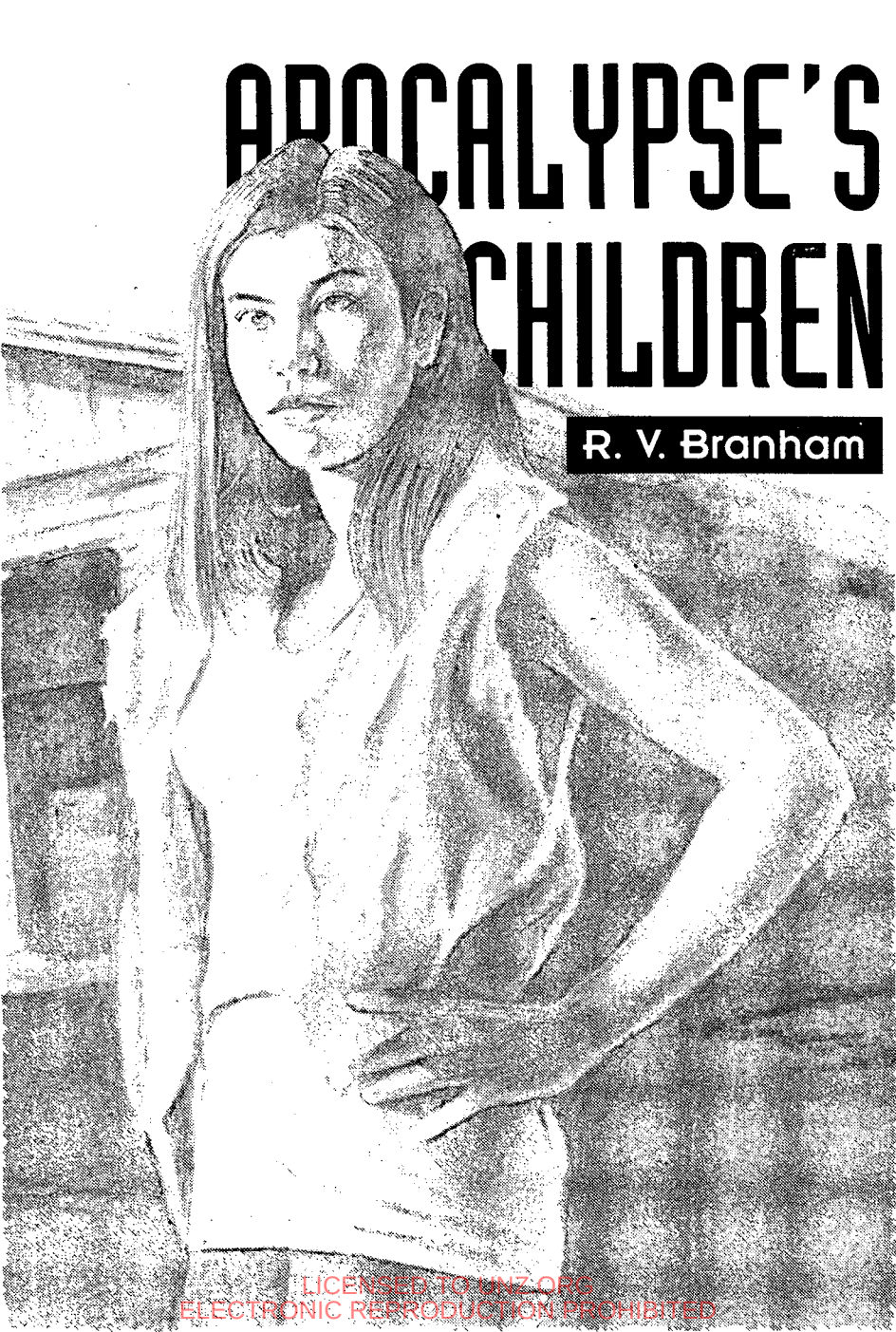
APOCALYPSE'S CHILDREN

R. V. Branham



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Tuesday.

Jams turned left, hid behind the parked and lopsided scabrous Winnebago. A Denver boot was attached to its one remaining tire. Jams caught his breath and leaned against the panel, felt its cool grooves on his back. This Winnebago, that Denver boot, had been here as long as Jams could remember.

A Hitachi helicopter somewhere hovered. Not directly overhead, but too close for comfort. Palm fronds and post-consumer paperscraps danced in heli-blade-and-Santa-Ana dustdevils. Jams listened, waited for sirens. The helicopter moved on, but Jams did not think it sagacious to try and look.

He hoped Comrade Zevon made it off the roof of the Safeway on the okey-doke. But that was really Zevon's problem. With any luck, Zevon would have made it to the mosque across the street, to hide among bowing grateful Turks, Afghans, Uzbeks, Kurds, Malays, and Lebanese. If Zevon got caught, so fucking what? All they could get Zevon for was vandalizing a surveillance vidcam. Zevon wouldn't crack if things got tough. Unless they got *bigtime* tough.

Jams, however, might have to face *real* charges. He heard the Winnebago voices. Thai, had to be. Smells of ginger, peanut sauce, chili peppers, and pork made his mouth water. Diminishing sirens told Jams security was headed the other way. He grabbed his knapsack and the lime green rocknrider, bearing the still-asleep joybundle, then ran like hell. Freshly paved asphalt patches, still warm, reacted to water from an epileptic lawn sprinkler and created vile oily steam that made Jams choke. No time to be sick. Jams strained into the effort of running faster. Zigging, zagging far and further from the Safeway.

Later, under the rusted cineplex marquee, Jams waited for Zevon. BRAINIACOS. The graffiti made the Hawthorne Mall ruins a safe rendezvous point. Other primo graffiti magik invoked FUZZY LOGIC or LOS FRACTALS. Just names. But Zevon had been right, these names had come to be the best cover. Jams heard winos fighting over a five-liter box at the erstwhile building's other end. The winos were on the okey-doke at a distance. If you lucked out, a wino got DTs bigtime, provided a bit of cabaret floorshow. Koalas scrambled in the eucalyptus trees above, causing branches to rustle gently as they chewed on succulent leaves. Jams reached into his knapsack for a tube of sunscreen and found he'd left it at home. Again. His moms were going to give him a shitpile of grief. Unlike Zevon, Jams had to watch out for UV . . . he'd already gone to herr doktor once to have mutating moles zapped from his freckly arms. Jams liked the feel of sunscreen, the cool glop, rubbing it on his everdry, everburning skin. Working it into his palms. Jams liked the coconut scent.

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Another matter, something else, ate at Jams, chewed on his gut. His wallet was gone. If he lost it in the Safeway lot . . . .

The joybundle wailed, squawled, faintly. Jams touched his St. Christopher medal. (He had found it in Nighttown . . . when his genetic mom Cait told him St. Christopher had been decanonized, Jams chose Christopher the Ex-Saint as the Anti-Saint for *him.*) Zevon was right, never look at the joybundles or you're done for.

Jams took off his UV shades, spat on the lenses, then wiped them clean with his shirt tail. He put them back on. The world was a halfshade duller, softer again.

Where was Zevon? Was he with Lori, had they deserted him and gone ahead to UCLA?

The UCLA research library's reference desk closed in an hour, and the next greenline was due to gravrail its way past the mall ruins in about five minutes. He wanted to stay in the shade forever, to sit on the damp and chilly concrete. It was so calm, under the marquee, the trees, the koalas, away from the burning late afternoon sun. But research called. The undinal call of homework, semifinals, research, projects. Jams had compiled preliminary calculations on Target A, Tunguska, in Siberia. Target C was a Munich biergarten in early fall, 1923. Target D intersected the Enola Gay's early August, 1945 flight plan. Lori was doing target E and Target F: one the Dallas-to-D.C. Air Force One flight plan at November's end in 1963, the other a sidewalk outside the Dakota apartments in New York, on a brisk December day in 1980.

Target B, at Zevon's suggestion, was the Crystal Foursquare Church in Miami, Florida, on a Sunday in the year 2000. The joybundle wailed again and made Jams consider the joybundles in that church, on that day. Zevon had already done preliminary calculations. Zevon argued that all the other dates were academic (worse than academic, more like a Sci Fi Channel circle jerk, to say nothing of potential danger and Heisenbergian problems of observed effect). But Jams knew and Lori knew that Target B was the one that mattered. (Especially after Zevon agreed to include calculations for the other targets as appendices to experiments with Target B.)

Wednesday.

Jams and Zevon, from the butcherblock isle of the snug kitchenette, listened to a news download. Jams added more almond butter to the sandwich his mom Cait had made. He added salt to the almond butter. (Cait always bought low sodium foodstuffs, then bought salt so you could put it back in.) Cait had gone back to bed with his other mom Maria, and he could hear them doing the nasty.

Zevon's UV shades made it hard for Jams to read his eyes, so he poked

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his tongue out at Jams to express himself. "C'mon, Jams, put the stoopard anchorbitch in holomode."

"And have Cait come down while you hump the holo?"

The upstairs bed continued to groan.

Jams knew Zevon was not going to say diddly: his two dads Ike and Ruben were most probably doing the nasty, too. Only they had a water bed that sloshed when they got too athletic. Adults, all they ever thought of.

From the living room the talkinghead announced: "This just in. The baby abducted yesterday from a Safeway parking lot was found last night in Hawthorne. The baby had been mauled by a koala and is in serious condition. No witnesses have come forth."

Zevon laughed. "Because there weren't any."

"I don't think it was such a good idea, Zeve."

"You're such a pussy, Jams. Two-mom pussy. Besides, there was an ichthyos on the car, born-agains are fair game."

"Two-dad dickhead. If they'd caught us, we'd do ankletime."

"Lower your body temperature, two-mom pussy. We weren't caught. They found the brat. It's low priority."

"I still can't find my wallet."

"Probably misplaced it at school."

Jams hit the remote for the kitchen monitor. The now smiling, now louder talkinghead continued: "Safeway spokespersons claim surveillance cams were sabotaged, enabling abduction while the baby's mother loaded groceries. From descriptions given by squatters, the abduction may have been committed by the Islamic sect, *Abu Bakr*. Other suspects include the leisure orgs *Los Fractals* and *Fuzzy Logic*. The tenth abduction of this year, down from last year's high of a hundred. All avenues are being explored."

"Meaning, Comrade Jams, that they have no clues."

"Meaning they'll pin the tail to the first donkeykong they get."

"Who's that, *Los Fractals*? Maybe Professor Moriarty or Darth Vader, too?"

"Point conceded."

"I didn't *disable* that Safeway cam." Zevon laughed. "I smeared the lens with doggus shittus."

"Canis shittus."

"Classicist."

The bedroom door whined open at stairtop. Mom Maria stumbled out and down, somehow not falling. Her cocoa skin and corn-rowed bronze hair glowed in amber morning light. Maria made her way to the Braun coffee pot (already prepped the night before), turned it on. She had that stupid grin of hers that Jams could never make heads or tails of.

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"Don't forget your sunscreen, Jams." Maria found the plastic sunscreen tube and put it in Jams' knapsack. "Pissed off your other mom. You know you Irish gotta watch that sun."

Heated water slurped and spurted through to the cone above the coffee pot; the pungent darkroast aroma filled the room.

Zevon, standing behind her, mimed Maria's breasts (visible through the ancient wornout extralarge T-shirt with a fading X). Maria turned, and Zevon immediately did traffic control gestures.

"Your ritalin patch running low?"

"Just some lysergic acid diethylamide titrate," Zevon said.

"Correcto." Maria grinned, despite herself. "That this year's science project? To try and put it in the water supply? Been done, didn't work. What *is* your project?"

"Tachyons. Tactical applications."

"I'm sorry I asked." Maria remembered something. "You didn't log off last night, Jams."

Jams blushed. Not logging off was serious, utility-wise. Especially with rate payers footing the bill for fusion. "Lo siento."

Maria, covering up for Jams' embarrassment, turned to Zevon: "I get up every night, two ayem. Check the locks. Security system. Meters. Sure 'nough. Jams is plugged in." Then, "just curious . . . why do you two wave your screensavers at each other when you're on the jeangenie?"

"Kid's Wisdom."

"Uhuh." Maria smirked at Zevon. Turned to reach for an immense dragon mug and turned back to Zevon and Jams. "I kept having nightmares, about Koala Baby. You know, Jams was abducted when he was a year old."

Jams and Zevon had heard this before, and knew they would hear it again, but they listened just the same.

"We had our car plastered with Lesbian Pride and Pro-Choice bumperstickers; somebody took real offense. Course Jams was lucky, all he got was sun-burned and dehydrated. Sick fucks drenched babies in gasoline, set them on fire. Torchtot, it was called. I heard Koala Baby's parents are Born-Agains. Tit for tat, it's all starting again."

Zevon turned away.

"They're down from last year, mom," Jams said. "We just heard the news download."

"Yeah." Maria poured low fat-milk into the mug and spooned in Nutrasweet. "You know, Zeve, you should use sunscreen, too. Us blackfolk aren't *that* immune." Maria came behind her blushing Jams. "Cait's egg, my womb." She hugged him. "Mi corazón."

"What happened to your bright red press-ons, mama?"

"Haha." She released him, hid her scarred fingers.

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* * *

Thursday.

Jams and Zevon met Lori Smythe, across the street from her concrete New England-fishing-village bunker of a condo. Jams noticed a raptor, a polyresin knockoff of a sculpted hawk, on the fiberglass roof. "Celebrating seven generations of pathetic architecture." Also, a porch cactus, like his mom Maria's.

"You just say that because your moms are city planners." Lori turned to look at the hawk. "It's cute. In a vomitous sorta way. Endearingly kitschy. They were used to drive birds away from farm granaries and gardens."

"Lori!"

Jams and Zevon turned.

"You forgot this!" Lori's mom was halfway down the drive.

Lori took the package from her mom. Lori's mom fussed with the collar of her blouse, and Lori stepped away. "Leave it alone."

". . . How are you boys doing?" Lori's mom smiled at Zevon and Jams.

"Fine," both replied.

"Jams, please thank your moms for helping with that zoning variance on our jacuzzi."

"Sure." Jams looked at Lori's mom. Tried to imagine her wearing a chador. Lori's mom had been a Sufi on and off. Now off. Jams wondered how much of their conversation Lori's mom had overheard yesterday, how much she knew, what she'd do about it.

"We've got to go, mom."

"Zevon, your dads okay?"

"Sure. Why?"

"I haven't seen them at the Subliminal Council meetings. Just concerned, that's all."

It was waste disposal day, so the homeless marched along the street (wearing grotty facemasks), stopped to sort through each recycling bin, to argue relative merits of each discard. Zevon, Jams, and Lori silently crossed to the other streetside as they neared, carefully negotiating jumbled jigsaws of already-heating asphalt and pothole. "Your dad move back in, Lori?"

Lori turned away, nodded. "I think he just got sick of living with his sister."

"Mrs. Wein, your ankletime aunt?" Zevon laughed. "The one with the bunnyslippers, always losing her remote?"

"Half-sister, actually. You have to be careful not to trigger her ankle. Otherwise she gets a few volts of juice. Inglewood Marshals send a law unit after her."

"Parents," Jams said. They all laughed. They came to the corner.

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Lori considered last night. "Five point seven?"

"Aftershock."

"Doesn't mean it wasn't five point seven. Not after El Grande."

Jams looked back to witness a security tank park by a homeless clusterfuck and check their permits.

"Heard about Koala Baby on the news download today." Lori regarded Zevon and Jams. "Koala Baby's in critical now."

Jams did a halfhearted shuffle. "That's infotainment."

"I thought so." Lori giggled. "Good thing *I* have an alibi."

"What about the other times. And what does your mom know?"

Lori stared at Jams. "What are you talking about?"

"Your mom eavesdropped yesterday. When we talked about the calculations for toasting Malcom's dad."

"She just walked in the room, walked right back out, even said 'xcuseme. My mom didn't hear shinola, Jams, 'kay? If she heard us talk about the Kennedy Assassination, about the Air Force One Dallas-to-D.C. flight, she'd say it was so cute that conspiracy theories were in again. That's all she'd say."

Zevon laughed. "Just because they're not out to get you, it doesn't mean that they *won't*." They walked on. "Lori, I saw a jeangenie newsbyte. About litigation over law units reaching ankletimers too late. Finding them electrocuted."

"Thanks for passing that along, Zeve." Lori paused. "You know those truepunky lines we did yesterday? I ran a test. Coke was cut with heroin."

"No wonder we got more nod than buzz." Jams paused. "What about a refund?"

Lori changed the subject: "Did I tell you guys I'm getting jacks for my birthday?"

"Triff." Jams slapped her palm. "Guess it works when your parents go through a bad patch."

"Hey, I didn't do any emotional blackmail. He *offered*."

Zevon kvetched: "My dads won't let me have implants until next year." Then, "I read the jeangenie Science News about the latest studies showing no developmental side-effects from jacks."

"I read that." Lori shrugged. "You're not allowed to jack in at school. Not until college. They're so *anal* re*tent*ive."

Two blocks later they were joined by Malcom.

Malcom's skin was delicate, pale, shining, almost reflective with greasy sunscreen. And he ponged—his right-thinking family regarded underarm deodorant as some part of the Devil's gameplan. Malcom was nine. Four years younger than Jams, Zevon, or Lori.

Lori greeted Malcom: "The Chosen Victim arrives."

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Zevon bleated the opening theme from "Le Sacre Du Printemps" while Jams percussed.

"Our phone's dead," Malcom told them.

Zevon turned to Malcom. "Who asked."

"Why don't you get God to fix your phone lines?" Jams said.

Lori shoved Malcom. "Step ahead, piglet."

Malcom flinched, but followed her orders.

They walked along the buckled sidewalk. A distant whirhum resounded from the sky. They looked up to see the Virgin blimp, its red V logo an option checked off high above the quake-cracked basin of the city of the queen of the angels.

"Look, a greased pig!" Zevon kicked Malcom.

Malcom almost lost his balance.

"Oinkoink." Lori bopped Malcom's elbow. "You know," Lori informed Jams and Zevon (who already knew), "this putz Malcom believes the End of the World is at hand. That the Millennium's coming. That Jesus shall come again to kick our asses."

"When's that, the year 3000 A.D.?"

"He's already thirteen years behind schedule." Jams, Zevon, and Lori were Millennium babies. Born midnight, Pacific Standard Time, December 31 A.D. 2000. Apocalypse's Children, as the print, phosphor, and liquid crystal media joke had gone.

"Spot the chopper," Zevon announced as a security heli flew overhead. "Hitachi."

Jams fought the urge to run, to hide, from the helicopter.

If he ran, he knew, he was lost. The helicopter veered off and southwardheaded. Jams turned to Lori and Zevon. "Think this Evangelical piglet wants his homework?"

"Yes," Malcom said.

Jams kicked Malcom, above the ass, below the knapsack.

Malcom fell down. It looked to Jams like he was fighting the urge to cry.

"Take off the UV shades."

Malcom did so. No tears.

"Put them back on. We don't want to see your ugly piglet eyes."

Lori spoke to Jams and Zevon: "You read that dreck about the artifact they found in Israel?"

"From The Future?" Zevon turned his wrist in a martial arts gesture.

"I can't believe they disseminated that paploid tabloid crapola on a scientific bulletin board." Lori shook her head.

"Actually." Jams pointed at Zevon. "Comrade Zeve theorizes that what we experience as ghosts are actually time travelers from the future who,

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in altering the past, fucked themselves up *big*time. That the ooglaboogey paranormal stuff we witness is the paradox of their ceasing to exist."

Zevon punched Jams on the arm. "I was employing irony."

Malcom blurted, "My father says it's another Sign!"

"Speak when *spoken* to, piglet!" Zevon knocked Malcom down. "That's for the stoopard comment you made yesterday."

Malcom got up, cautiously. "You hit me yesterday for that."

"And every day until you recant, piglet."

"All I said was what's in the Bible . . . death to homosexuals."

"You're talking about *his* moms and *my* dads," Zevon warned Malcom. "One of Comrade Jams's moms had her fingernails torn out by *Opus Dei* pigpals of your father, so hit erase."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry to hear about that," Malcom said, slowly. "Hate the sin, not the sinner." Then, trying to be cheerful: "Nails do grow back."

"Not if the nail bed's damaged." Zevon raised his fists, triangulated on Malcom's face. "If your clan finds California so sinful, then why don't you go back to Florida?"

"What's left of it," Jams added.

"Piglet." Zevon lowered his fists. "You can't believe everything you read in the Bible."

Malcom looked at them. "It's all true!"

"No." Jams shook his head. "It *isn't* . . . it's, like, an anthology of late-stone-age Middle Eastern monotheism. There are, what, eight or nine versions, not counting various Apocryphal Gospels? And the science in the Bible is just plain fucked."

Malcom glared. "Before Science, there was God."

"And after Science, God took a hike." Jams laughed

Lori protested: "I thought Nietzsche took care of God."

"Cinco puntos." Jams tallied.

Lori turned to Zevon. "Since we're so kind as to do this cretin's homework, should we give it to him, or tear it up."

Zevon deliberated. "Judgment of Solomon: Tear it up."

". . . Please."

Jams took a folder from his knapsack, took two sheets of paper from the folder. "Please what, piglet?"

"Please don't."

Jams tore the two sheets of paper.

"Too late."

As they neared the campus of the magnet secondary, Jams turned to Malcom. "You know what I think?"

Malcom cringed. ". . . What?"

"I think your father abducted Koala Baby."

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"He—he—he *couldn't,*" Malcom said.

"I thought he was indicted for that," Lori said.

"Charges were dropped," Malcom said.

"C'mon," Zevon said to Jams and Lori, "Nothing was proven. Right, Malcom?"

"Right," Malcom said. "They couldn't prove a thing."

Zevon smiled at Malcom. "I did your homework, too, piglet. Since you didn't blubber when Jams tore up *a* copy, I think we can go ahead and let you have *another* copy . . . ."

"Thank." Malcom wept as Zevon gave him his homework. "You."

". . . *this* time."

Friday.

Jams, on his way from his Earth Sciences block to the cafeteria, smelled the noon-meal slop cut through the janitor's ammonia. He passed through a metal detector.

"James McGrath," a voice called. Jams turned to the monitor. A talkinghead. At first it looked like his Earth Sciences talkinghead. It turned out to be an administrative geek. "Report to the Vice-Principal's office."

"But." Jams turned to the monitor. To the vidcam above it. He'd heard Koala Baby was still on the critical list. The wallet had been found, and now it was to be bigtime trouble.

"*Now,* James."

Lori Smythe and Zevon were sitting in the office. Zevon made the scissors gesture. Lori made the stone gesture. They moved over, and Jams sat with them on the bench.

The office door opened and Jams peered in, saw a person behind the desk. Saw their shoulder. Bad posture. Not getting enough exercise. An ergonomic and cardiovascular tragedy just waiting for an insurance adjuster, as Lori might put it. Someone else held the door open. Jams noted an antique wind-up Beatles watch on the wrist. "James McGrath." No fingernails. Gone, like his mom Maria's.

"Good luck," Lori whispered.

Jams knew what to say.

"Please, sit down," instructed the one standing behind Jams, a redhead geek who usually stank of cheap scotch and cheaper aftershave, who popped into classes unannounced to make sure no one had turned the sound down. Jams wondered if it was true about his Bosnian exploits . . . he was just ancient enough. (Or had he just been captured when *Opus Dei* had become overbusy?)

The one behind the desk scrolled through a file on his monitor; Jams saw his name highlighted. "I imagine you're wondering why we've called you in."

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"Well, yes." Jams smiled meekly. "I am . . . curious."

Had to be the wallet, they'd found the wallet at the Safeway lot. They were going to arrest them. But press pause and scroll up, Lori had not been in on that game.

"One of the younger kids was sent in yesterday. Seems he not only cheated on his homework, but added abusive terms—having to do with gender preference and ethnicity, addressed to the instructor."

"You mean Malcom Kant."

The one behind the desk looked at Jams. "Yes. How did you know?" There was a passionless persistence in his gaze that set Jams's alarms off.

"Easy guess. He follows us to school every day. Acts like a little hate-criminal. Makes harassing remarks to Zeve and me. Denigrates our parents. Quotes Bible Chapter and Verse at us. Tells us to watch his dad's public access ministry. Be Saved."

The one behind the desk glanced up to the one behind Jams. As the one behind Jams spoke, Jams felt the gaze at the back of his head. As if he wanted to explode it. Use some telekenetic juju to make Jams's head go boom. Jams wondered if the interview leading to his loss of fingernails were what made him prefer to stand behind when questioning.

"Malcom says you follow him, all of you, each morning. Says that you kick him. The nurse found bruises on his buttocks."

"Well," Jams said. "Malcom told me his father spanks him at the drop of a hat. And . . . ."

"And what?"

Jams remembered the scissors-stone gesture. "Well, this morning, Malcom was taunting Zeve, I mean, Zevon."

"Taunting?" The one behind the desk looked skeptically at Jams.

". . . Saying things. To Zevon."

"Zevon?" the one behind Jams said. "Sure it was Zevon?"

Stonescissors, everyone.

Stonepaper, nobody.

Paperscissors, Lori.

Scissorspaper, Jams.

Scissors-stone, Zevon.

"Yes. Zevon."

"Well," the one behind Jams said. "Going back to your comment about Malcom being spanked. If you suspected abuse, why didn't you report it?"

"He just said he gets *spanked,* so we didn't think it was *that* serious."

"Malcom said you did his homework," the one behind the desk gassed on (in his annoying monodrone), "that you three always do his homework. That you deliberately got him into trouble."

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"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't accept that. Why would I do homework for someone who says my parents deserve to die?" Then, "Are we being accused of helping Malcom cheat?"

"No." The one behind the desk glanced at the one behind Jams. "This is . . . informal. We're just trying to determine what's happening." He showed Jams Malcom's homework.

Jams gazed at the printout of the homework, bit his lip. Handed the printout back. "That's dysfunctional," he said to the one behind the desk. "This is printed on an old dotmatrix. Real retro. All of us have laserjets."

"Well." The one behind the desk sighed, looked to the one behind Jams. "That'll be all."

Jams looked at the one behind the desk.

The one behind Jams addressed him, his persistent eyes still probing: "Don't they call you one of the Gentech Twins—"

Jams, halfturned, smiled. "Yes."

"You and Lori and Zevon built that gyrocopter last year."

"Yes."

The one behind the desk spoke, "Great project."

Jams halfturned back, smiled again.

"Our insurance carrier didn't think so," the one behind Jams said. "Tried to cancel our liability coverage."

The one behind the desk smirked at Jams. "That'll be all."

Saturday.

"Jams, we're all out of tampons," Maria called from the downstairs loo. "Be a dear and go to Safeway, por favor con azucar?"

". . . Now?"

"I'm on my period, too," Cait called from upstairs. "There'll be blood in the streets if you don't get going."

"Okayokay."

Jams walked past the booted, lopsided, evermore rusted and scabrous Winnebago. A Thai girl sidewalksat in a banged-up lawnchair. Drinking Thai iced coffee. Coffee. Coconut milk. Sugar. Ice cubes. More sugar. Third trimester, she looked like. She sneered at Jams, and he wondered if she recognized him. These Thais kept to themselves; he shouldn't worry. People with a Denver boot attached to their home did not go running to law units.

Jams noticed several new surveillance cams. A helicopter buzzed, somewhere, no doubt on lot patrol. Jams rushed across the broiling asphalt. He saw graffiti all over the mosque. LOS FRACTALS. Whoa! Hold on. Strike the set. That wasn't a proper crime tag. And why was that kidpack rushing into the traffic?

A quadraplegic photographer stationed at the entrance clicked his

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tongue at his computer-cum-larynx to offer deals on family portraits. Jams was drawn to posted signs offering a substantial reward for data on the Koala Baby abduction.

Inside the cooly overlit Safeway, Jams went to the manager's pit. Jams thought he recognized the assistant manager from yesterday, when he'd asked about his lost wallet. The employee turned to pick up something and Jams got a better look. Different assistant manager. He went to the window.

". . . 'Xcuseme, I lost my wallet here Tuesday, I think it was. Anyone turned in a blue and yellow nylon and velcro wallet?"

"Let me."

"Thanks."

The assistant manager opened a drawer, fumbled through an assortment of lost items. "Name?"

"James McGrath."

The assistant manager turned to him. "Zilcho." Then turned again, looking at something Jams could not see. Monitors? A composite drawing of the suspect? "We have your."

"What?"

"Oh." The assistant manager smiled. "Yesterday's manager wrote your, on our lost and found. If you like, you can leave your. We can call."

"No, that won't be necessary. I come in all the time."

Jams was halfway home when he realized he'd forgotten the tampons. Back to Safeway, it was.

Jams stood at the entrance before the open*close*open glass door reflection. Something Jams saw made him drop, fall forward onto the doormat. The minaret had collapsed like the ash on a cigarette, abruptly, yet with adrenalized clarity. The glass of the Safeway windows, the entrance and exit door glass shattered at the sonic news of the explosion. Customers, employees, security, it made no difference. People, flat on the ground, or on their knees, became hysterical. One person ran and yelled. Jams saw the assistant manager, whose face and shirt bled, white shirt blooming red, red vest redder. Jams rose, brushed the now-beaded glass from his shirt and pants, and ran to Aisle 10 for the tampons. Sirens, nearing. Nobody noticed when he left without paying. Outside, helis circled the mosque.

An old Brazilian CD poured forth its polysounds through speakers, bouncing them everywhere. Zevon and Jams sort-of liked this old Brazilian samba shit. Tom Zé. Hips of tradition.

"I was at the Safeway today, a tampon run."

"So?"

"Haven't heard about the mosque?"

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Zevon looked for something. "No." Zevon's two dads, Ike and Ruben, paced the condo. As part of their psychic war. Then sat backtoback at their work stations. Loudly ignored each other. Zevon's dad Ruben wore headphones, listened to a recent Adams opera about the last days of Hong Kong.

"Someone just blew the Safeway mosque up."

"We thought it was another Torrance refinery fire."

A news download displayed the mosque, across from the Safeway. Sans minaret. A marble wall cracked, halfcollapsed. Encircled by the devotion of helis and firetrucks. Zevon's dad Ruben watched the ruined mosque, then refocused on his work monitor.

Zevon regarded this news from Jams. "Bigtime. That marble came from Italy, from the same quarry Michelangelo used."

"*Los Fractals* did it. See the graffiti?"

"Get thee behind me, Jams." Zevon looked closer, saw the graffiti. "*Los Fractals*. C'mon, let's go to UCLA Library."

"That's ridiculous. Link their MELVIL."

"You know how *anal* their reference desk is."

"I thought this was *our* project, Zeve. I ran the math with Lori."

"Jams, you and Lori downloaded the calculations from her uncle at JPL."

"So, we subcontracted it, Zeve. 'Sides, he's with Cal Tech, not JPL. *He* downloaded it from JPL, charged it to Cal Tech, then we downloaded from him. Aren't we all standing on the shoulders of giants? I agree with Lori, we should consider an alternate project. Extra credit. No prisoners. Just in case we get—"

Zevon's dad Ike now paced, absently rubbed his goatee; Ruben sat at his work station. Ike and Ruben. Pacing, sitting, ignoring.

"Just in case we get what, Jams? Worst that'll happen is we'll be scolded by university security or some department head."

Jams wanted to say something, but thought better of it. He killed time by looking at one of the many bookcases in the house, filled with hardbacks and paperbacks, books-on-tape, floppies, music CDs and CD-ROMS. Everything filed alphabetically, by author, or composer, regardless of format, of genre, of medium. Jams opened a sturdy old hardback. *Interzone*. Acidfree paper.

"I reread that one every few years." Zevon's dad Ike stood behind Jams. "Like to borrow it?"

"No." Jams put the book back. "Don't read fiction."

"Your loss, boyo."

Jams noticed that Ike's goatee had gone greyer.

A download newsbyte caught everyone's attention. A title read: Koala Baby. Then footage of a baby under hospital glass.

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Ike turned, saw the news clip. "God. Whoever did that. I am not violent, but they should be fucking shot on sight."

"Kneecapped," offered Ruben, still at his work station.

Zevon loaded up his knapsack, then added two battery packs. "Come along, help me look this stuff up. It's all in *bound* journals, not on any nets, drives, or discs."

"Retro."

"Come with me, Jams."

"Can I go part-way with you?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Don't forget your sunscreen and UV shades," Ike said as they left.

"Careful, boys," Ruben called from his work station. "Very. Stay away from houses of worship."

Jams saw a Hitatchi security helicopter.

"Becalm yourself. If they were going to arrest, you'd already be under anklelock."

"Forget not, Zeve. You were in on it."

"All *I* did was goof on the roof."

They ran into Lori at the Rosecrans and Aviation stop. Zevon asked, "What up?"

"Some errands."

"Folks fighting again?" Jams inquired.

"What's it to you?"

"Just asking. An expression of concern. Of solidarity." All three boarded the Greenline gravrail. A kidpack crossed Aviation, toward the stop. Too late, the Greenline was moving.

Dying eucalyptuses, cardboard and fiberglass homeless homes, roofs in need of shingles, and flapping sheets hung to dry shuffled past. Their car was half-filled with commuters lost in Sony books, laptops, jacked into some hinterheaven-or-hell. A paranoid few wore sterile facemasks.

Zevon sat across from Lori. "I'm going to UCLA. Don't know about Jams."

"Going to Nighttown. Check the Westchester ruins out. Explore my roots. Harass inmates. Usual. Want to comp, Lori?"

"Nothanks. Nighttown's too juvie."

"She'd much prefer UCLA."

"Nothanks." Zevon, Lori, and Jams were at the back, across from two North Redondo seniors who passed a truepunky smokeless bong forth and back between them. A smoke detector chirpchirped. Nobody looked up. A signboard across the aisle warned against jacksharing. Jams pointed at the sign. DATA DISEASE IS DEADLY DATA. "They *paid* someone to write that, Zeve?"

Zevon shrugged. "Just jealous, Jams."

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"So I'm jealous; still sucks canis shittus." Jams looked at the poster again, saw the logo of the Subliminal Council. Oops. Zevon's dads might have written that slogan. "You saw the kidpack at Rosecrans. There was a kidpack running from the Safeway mosque. You saw the graffiti."

"Trademark infringement?" Zevon wondered. "Unforeseen effect."

Lori turned to Jams and Zevon. "What's this about the Safeway mosque, guys?"

"*Los Fractals* almost burnt it to the ground."

"They *did*," Zevon said. "I saw the newsbyte myself."

Lori giggled nearly to the Manchester stop, where Jams got off. "Burn a mosque for me," Lori requested.

Jams passed one of the few anlketimers left in Nighttown, incarcerated in a mostly abandoned apartment building off Pershing. Several signs in English, Spanish, Korean, Vietnamese, Khymer, Laotian, and Arabic, warned against trespassing. The ankletimer stood at the window, then turned and exposed tattooed buttocks to Jams. Shouted obscene suggestions. Jams thought of the monkey house at the late great Ellay zoo.

Two surveillance cams pivoted to follow Jams as he climbed and jumped through a convulsion of road rubble. A few cams had been covered by plastic trashbags. Law units came by every few days or so to drop off food, water, batteries, toilet paper to the naked tattooed ankletimer, to uncover the cams, and then left. Then some kidpack childthug or other bagged the surveillance cams again.

Jams wished Zevon was with him. Zevon would have all the cams covered in less than ten minutes.

Further upstreet, he passed a Catholic church which still had most of its stained glass windows, still had a priest (live, not downloaded), still had a loyal parish. Drugfiends and homeless, mostly. Harmless, mostly. Inside now, mostly.

The tide reached up, just beyond the beach, past the old Vista Del Mar road, to abandoned houses, deli and video shops, Italian restaurants of Nighttown. Overflow from the old Hyperion sewage treatment plant occasionally wafted through. Jams took great care in wandering through Nighttown. Zevon's donor mom had owned a pizza shop around here . . . or so his dads said. And Jams had roots here, too. His great-grandparents and grandparents had lived around here. Jams, ever-prepped, had a Victorinox Classic Swiss Army knife. A wrench to turn gas or water lines on and off, as needed. A thin saw blade to cut half rusted bars. A first aid kit. A laptop. Water purification tabs. A roll of heavy No. 4 plastic trashbags. All in his knapsack.

Jams saw fresh graffiti. LOS FRACTALS. BRAINIACOS.

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A kidpack stenciled graffiti on a wall two blocks away. They were younger childthugs, probably from the Culver City barrio. Boatkids. Jams imagined each childthug in the kidpack wearing lady's lacesided boots, in depmode, boot toes lopped off to liberate wriggly kidpack toes. He wondered what colors the handles were of the switchblades each kid packed. Jams saw them before they could see him. Noted that they carried an orange orange rockinrider. The joybundle must've been napping or otherwise comatose. He ducked, crouched, waited for them to finish, to move along. They couldn't be older than seven or eight, but if they were muling guns or poppies, well, all programs selfaborted.

FUZZY LOGIC. Repeated, endlessly, like a mantra, a prayer wheel, or an old Warhol silkscreen. Covering the wall, basking in sunglare.

One of *their* tags. Lori's? Not that FUZZY LOGIC, LOS FRACTALS, or BRAINIACOS even *existed*. It had been Zevon's idea to convince julio and julia public that these particularly diabolical leisure orgs were real. With assist from assorted childthugs and kidpacks (and from dopefiends Lori knew), these three leisure org willowisps had in just two years become regional urban myths.

Jams turned, saw the kidpack return. He looked for a place to hide, and found an old pizza shop. The carpet was halftorn-out. Moldy. Brown newsprint, rotting words and images everywhere. An exhortation to VOTE GREEN. A flaky Christ. A satellite. Jams felt floorboards spring with each step. The wood was spongy. Liable to give out. Jams heard the kidpack run past, heard shouts. A tossed bottle flew through a doorway and blossomed into unfolding shards. Jams only caught the briefest glimpse of the arm, but he'd swear that the arm bore tattoos of Mayan or Aztec Gods. Maybe Cabaguil, Mayan Heart of the Sky. Camaxtli, Aztec God of War. Mixcoatl, God of the Hunt, Stargod and Cloud Serpent. Or Hunahpu, Mayan Sun God, Creator of Magic. A glasschunk hit Jams, landed in fore-arm flesh, halfway between elbow and wrist. Jams winced, managed not to cry out. Then removed the chunk. He took the first aid kit from his knapsack and cleaned the wound. Jams heard the kidpack go north, to the floatingworld of Marina del Rey. He put the first aid kit away. Made a mental to get more bandaids, more iodine. There was a footlocker, in a hallway. Locked. He pried it open. Checkered red and white tablecloths, musty as all hell. Paper napkins being dined on by termites. A box containing tiny plastic Amerind warriors. A T. Rex. Hot wheels. A photograph of a baby, not unlike the baby photos Zevon's dads transferred to CD. But weren't all babies interchangeable? Still. It *might* be Zevon. There were wiseass sparks around the baby's crinkly eyes. Could be. Jams kept the photo. He listened for distant noises. Scratching, digging. Like toenails on wood. Deaf airport rabbits. Rabid rats. Perhaps a feral cat or dog or ferret. A possum, possibly even a koala. Maybe

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even those truepunky kidpacks, deciding to claim the mythic mantle of FUZZY LOGIC for their own *real* leisure org. Jams went out into the hot wind of late afternoon. No Trespassing signs were posted all over Nighttown. Most of them shot full of holes.

Jams heard, distantly, reports of gunfire or cherry bombs, and an infant joybundle's wail.

He passed two rustpocked satellite dishes, once part of a Hughes-GM station, and now gathering sand and dessicated palm fronds instead of skysignals.

Jams felt a seabreeze hit his face as he left the alley. A figure glided toward him. Jams froze, involuntarily blinked. The figure was just as abruptly gone. For half a second, Jams would swear it had been Zevon. Maybe one of Zevon's time-traveler ghosts. Maybe *La Llorona.* (Ooglaboogey Aztec and Catholic ghost, armed with coathanger and syringe, and summoned by Maria as a threat when Jams wanted to go out and play soccer after dark.) There was the bark and yap of a dog in pursuit of something. Coming nearer, then fading. Jams passed a surveillance vidcam tower. The vidcam did not pivot. Jams looked again. Found sparrows nesting under it. Amidst tatters of sunbleached No. 4 plastic trashbags.

A ferret hurtled past Jams, brushed against his leg. Then bounced off and over a fence. A moment later a dog almost knocked Jams over. Just like a German Shepherd that had killed his pet ferret when he was six years old. The dog went around the fence. He followed them up a sand dune, shouting, "Pick on someone your own fucking size!"

There was a ranchstyled house below, some twenty meters from the ever-rising tide tangles of kelp. Odor of seasalt and searot hit him. Jams loved this area. He'd spent a bit of childhood here, when his moms were in hiding. Hidden by his grandparents, along this shore. This had been not long after his abduction, according to his moms; he had to take their word for it, having no memory of it himself. For all he knew, this wreck was their house. All houses in ruin looked alike. Jams sniffled, in reaction to faint remnants from abandoned refineries to the south. Beyond the house was Santa Monica Bay. The Pacific Ocean. Its horizon smudged by smog brought back out from the desert by staticky Santa Anas. The sky looked like someone, Malcom, say, had taken a dirty eraser to it. And only managed to smear more shit across the horizon. Death to Malcom. Jams still had doubts about Target B. (But Zevon had dug up newsbytes on Malcom's dad, on the Crystal Foursquare's part in the Dirty Little War of 2005, and tilted matters in his favor.) Jams looked at the horizon, seeking the curve of the earth. He knew it was there. But. Just once, he wanted to see it with his own eyes. Not on disc, not

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on video. Not even a holo. Jams wanted the Copernican confirmed over the Ptolemaic, wanted some refutation to shitpates like Malcom.

The roof to the old ranchstyled house was caved-in (partly). But none of the windows were broken. Jams heard the roar of an airbus; covered his ears. The airbus cast its shadow over the next dune, over homes, over tide; its shadow bent, buckled to match the terrain of its projection.

He'd be able to see the curve of the earth in an airbus. (The one time Jams'd flown in an airbus he'd been five years old, and had been so tired he'd slept through the entire flight.)

He slid down the hill, to the house. Halfway down he saw the dog. The dog came toward him. The dog was mangy and one of its eyes was injured, nearly swollen shut. Jams looked closer, saw the eye missing from its socket, gone.

"Hey, canis." The dog tilted its head, wagged its tail.

The dog followed him to a garage. Back door torn off its hinge. Late afternoon sun pouring in through the vandal-opened front. A roofbeam had collapsed, rotted by termites. Pieces of wood splayed, like feathers or a geisha's fan.

Jams stood at the back door. A reek of urine held him back. He saw a doorway, with the door also torn off, to a kitchen area. The sun bounced off the floortile and a section of formica drainboard. Jams felt the dog snouting against his crotch, and moved away. The dog followed. Then stopped, sat down. Wagged its tail. There was a cabinet in the garage. Between an old water heater and the doorless rear doorway. Jams opened the cabinet. Nada. Irritated, he slammed the door. The cabinet fell over. Rust and termite dust made him cough. He left the garage. He had hoped to find some family relic, maybe something of his great-grandfather's. His great-grandfather had worked with Oppenheimer on the Manhattan Project. Hell, the baby photo probably wasn't even of Zevon. So much for a day of magic and portent. Still, it wasn't every day you saw a mosque go boom.

The dog barked again, waiting for Jams to pat it on the head or play with it. Jams considered, briefly, taking the dog home, asking his moms if he could keep it. He looked at its eyeless eye.

"Nice canis. *Stoopard* canis."

Sunday.

"Can I drive, uncle? I've got a permit."

"No, Lori, *I've* got a license."

They were on their way to The Lab, with Lori's uncle, who drove a Geo. Jams looked up to the Hollywood hills and felt a sadness at finding the stoopard ancient Hollywood Sign vanished from the cityscape, then felt silly for being so sentimental.

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"I sort of miss it, too," Zevon said, having followed Jams's gaze. Lori, still pouting, ignored them.

"Goddamn leisure orgs," Lori's uncle said. A newsbyte two months before had attributed destruction of the Hollywood Sign to *Brainiacos,* or to the Islamic fundamentalist org, *Abu Bakr.* (The sign's replacement was tied up in litigation between city, insurance companies, and survivors of homeowners below the ex-letters of the ex-sign.)

Jams wondered what Lori's uncle would say if they told him that *Los Fractals, Fuzzy Logic,* and *Brainiacos* were nothing more than a surreal P.R. campaign, and *their* P.R. campaign, at that.

The car radio was on, and there was a newsbyte about Koala Baby. Another newsbyte told of a leisure org setting a houseboat restaurant afire in the marina, killing twenty. And that *Fuzzy Logic* was suspected. Lori's uncle turned the radio off. "That's depressing."

Lori's uncle explained to them that The Lab was to begin preliminary testing next week, sending tachyons to the past—that electron neutrinos would be used, since they actually displayed all the theoretical behavior of tachyons.

"Not all physicists agree," Lori said.

"Enough do," Jams said.

Lori's uncle gave a rundown of how an electron neutrino's tritium beta decay gave a final burst of energy instead of steadily dying down.

And that to boost and manipulate the electron neutrino, you used magnets to focus it into a laser beam, "forward into the past," through whatever celestial body at whatever light year distance (those long-ago past-points of earth's and the solar system's orbit through the galaxy).

Zevon asked how they could know they had succeeded.

Lori's uncle said that they'd target a research station that had looked for tachyons in the Antarctic, in the late '90s.

Zevon asked if they could do more than communicate; asked if an electron neutrino tachyon did not actually change the imaginary number to a negative number and reduce energy to zero, traveling at infinite speed. And how best to effect the electron charge exchange, in which positrons became anti-matter (and released 10,000,000 volts of gamma energy radiation in two opposite paths).

Lori's uncle glanced at Zevon a moment, and then back at the road. "Just for that you're all invited to the experiments next week. I'll pull every string I can to get you kids in."

Jams asked if sending tachyons back to scientists looking for tachyons might not be equivalent to archaeologists salting a dig, in effect if not in intention. Or if they might create a sort of spacetime causal paradox, even alter history.

"Well," Lori's uncle said, "we'll find out, won't we?"

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"Maybe not," Lori said.

"Sorry it's taking so long, kids."

"No problemo," Zevon said, "our parents know where we are."

They were still in The Lab, with Lori's uncle. The Lab was in the bottom two levels of a rarely used underground parking lot just off the Cal Tech campus—sealed off from the rest of the parking lot, and only accessible by a private stairwell and freight elevator going down to a tunnel leading to the basement of the Physics fusion reactor facility.

There was ancient graffiti on the cinderblock walls. XTC. GOD DOES NOT PLAY DICE, GOD PLAYS LOTTO. BIG BROTHER IS YOU WATCHING. LOSIN MY RELIGION. WHEN I HEAR THE WORD GUN I WANT TO REACH FOR MY ART. The vertiginously canted floor had serpentine cables and wires, retrofited to older outlets or leading to bank (after bank) after bank of metal-encased apparatus, where oscilloscopes and meters danced a Saint Vitus voltage slamdance. Some cabinets bore the usual logos: Tektronix, Hughes-GM, Teledyne, Mitsubishi Dutch Shell.

"Listen to that," Lori said.

"Fridge," Jams said.

"Liquid nitrogen."

"I *know* that."

"Bullshit."

"Who shit?"

"You shit."

"Bullshit."

"Who shit?"

"You two are *so* callow." Lori and Jams slugged Zevon.

The three sat on folding chairs by a "wall" of toppling sandbags and bricks set up for protection from the cyclotron radiation.

Two technicians, Geof and Matt, cleaned before their shift ended. Lori asked the technicians how they managed to keep the building so cool, the air fresh. One of them told her about air-conditioning units on top of the parking lot, and ionizers on everyone's desks.

After the technicians left, Lori regarded the fax of the baby photo Jams had found in Nighttown. "It *could* be you, Comrade Zeve."

"Give it to me, then."

"No way," Jams said, "you'll destroy the evidence."

"Yeah." Lori pointed at the grainy face, twice decayed in a reproduction of a reproduction. "That weak chin. Dead giveaway."

"Sort of a King Charles chin," Jams said.

Lori's uncle finally emerged from his calculations: "Excuse me, I have to go get that pizza I promised you guys."

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"Vegetarian," Lori demanded.

"Fine. Anyone want to come along?"

"Sure," Zevon and Jams said, rising.

Lori did not rise to join them. "I'll wait here."

Lori's uncle paused, looked at Lori. "Don't mess with anything, 'kay?"

"Won't touch a thing, unc'. No problemo."

Lori, of course, lied. She removed the screws from several air-conditioning grates before her uncle, Zevon, and Jams returned with the vegetarian pizza.

After midnight, Zevon went to Jams's house and waited for him in the alley. Zevon and Jams then headed to Lori's and waited for her to sneak out.

They took a Redline gravrail and glared at pissy-smelling drunks and other creeps of late night transportation all the way to Pasadena. One drunk sang drunksongs. At the Adams stop, three goons in trenchcoats and UV-shades boarded. Two goons went to a pathetically thin and balding man in an overlarge suit while the third goon blocked the doorway to prevent the door from closing. The singing drunk quit singing. The door's voice said, *please step out of the doorway, we pride ourselves on meeting our schedule.* The goon blocking the door used the brass head of his cane to smash the lens of the surveillance cam. No one else on the gravrail said anything. Zevon and Jams clung to Lori, who clung to them. Everyone looked out their window, admired the non-view. The pathetically thin and balding man in the overlarge suit collapsed as the goons hauled him to the door and dragged him from the gravrail, like a large duffel bag. The door closed. The singing drunk resumed singing. A few passengers laughed. Most kept admiring their non-views. Jams, Zevon, and Lori got off at the Cal Tech station, four blocks away from the parking lot above The Lab. They said nothing about the pathetically thin and balding man in the overlarge suit or the three trenchcoated goons.

Lori found a ladder leading to the top level of the parking lot above The Lab. All of them climbed up.

Lori waited on the dank roof, among the droning air conditioners, while Jams and Zevon secured and then lowered a rope down a central duct. She held a fish-flashlight on them as they climbed down to the bottom. Halfway down, they had to stop, when Zevon's knapsack got caught on a hook holding cables in place. Jams managed to reach up and unsnag him.

They reached the bottom and wriggled into a duct.

Zevon was at the computer, flipping through his notepad as he entered

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coordinates for their science project. Jams adjusted the equipment (one of the technicians had shown him how), and came back to the control room.

Jams looked over Zevon's shoulder. The words *Florida, Miami,* and a date in the year A.D. 2000 were on the monitor. As well as names and dates for the other targets.

"You fuck . . . we were supposed to stay with Target B."

"Where's the fun in that? Besides, now you get your stoopard Siberia."

A door opened, distantly, and two voices could be heard. They saw harsh hall light cut into the room from beneath a door.

"Shit." Zevon turned to Jams. "I didn't think the guards came in here."

They hid behind a row of Teledyne's finest, while the security guards examined the area.

"Hey," a guard said. "Someone left the computer on. Some other stuff's on, too."

"Leave it," the other guard said. "They're running tests."

Zevon went to the computer when the guards had gone, and pressed Enter and logged off.

"Those guards weren't in the program, Zeve." Jams was furious as they climbed back up the air-conditioning duct. "I think you overkilled the targets."

"It'll increase our likelihood of success."

"*This* fuck," Jams said to Lori, "just targeted A through F."

Lori looked at Zevon. " 'S that terribly wise?"

They were halfway home when Zevon got a worried look. Jams looked at Zevon, and remembered the notebook, with all the data, left in The Lab.

"What else is wrong, Zeve," Lori said.

"Nothing."

Monday.

"Somebody told me they saw you near Nighttown," Cait said to Jams, during dinner.

"When was this?"

"Don't be so snotty. You're not even fourteen yet—"

"If I'm accused of hanging out at Nighttown, I want to know when."

"Saturday."

"I was at UCLA. With Comrade Zeve and Lori. Researching our project."

"So." Cait dropped the Nighttown lecture. "Did you guys meet your science project deadline?"

"Yeah." Jams loaded the dishwasher.

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"Almost forgot." Cait rose, handed Jams his wallet. "Found it in the hamper. How long've you been going around without it?"

". . . I thought it was in my knapsack," Jams lied.

From the living room, Maria called: "We're not going to get a fax from some hall monitor demanding a parent conference over your science project, are we?"

Cait laughed. "Look, they'll either get a National Science Award or a knock on the door from the FBI." Then, to Jams: "What *is* your project, anyway?"

"An Assessment of Problems and Possibilities Confronting Terrorist Orgs or Non-Aligned Nation States Attempting to Create A Tachyon Bomb."

After loading the dishes, Jams excused himself.

Through the fringe of leaves, Jams looked across the street into the facing negative image of Zevon's concrete tudor bunker bedroom window. Zevon's laptop was visible, its swimming bytefish glowing in the dusk. Jams held his laptop up to the window, held his swimming bytefish up for Zevon to see.

Then Jams set the laptop on the windowsill and keyed in his modem to confer with Zevon and Lori (a few blocks away, in her concrete New England-fishing-village bunker).

Lori: *I still can't believe that crap about Malcom.*

Jams: I BET THAT WAS WHY WE HAD ALL THE HELIS LAST NIGHT.

Zevon: *When are you going to fix your caplock key, Jams? I asked about Malcom today, and everyone said "Malcom who?" I checked Records, and, voilá, no Malcom enrolled. Ever.*

Lori: *I feel awful.*

Zevon: *Salmonella?*

Jams: YOU COULDN'T STAND MALCOM. I MYSELF AM NOT GOING TO MOURN THE DEATH OF ANYONE WHO CURSES MY MOMS.

Lori: *Not that. It's my parents: They're divorcing.*

Zevon: *But your dad just moved back in.*

Lori: *To gather and pack up all of his crap.*

Zevon: *But you've seen it coming.*

Lori: *Seeing it coming, and seeing it happening are two different processes. Mom wants to take me to NY . . . dad wants to keep me here in Cali.*

Zevon: *Think you'll move?*

Lori: *Won't happen. Mom wants to move to NY. To sagging Sag Harbor.*

Zevon: *To sinking Sag Harbor.*

Lori: *My uncle just called, he wanted to talk to my mom.*

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Zevon: *Do you think he suspects anything?*

Jams, glancing out the window, saw a dark Geo pull up in front of Zevon's house. Jams: LET'S TAKE THIS A STEP AT A TIME.

Zevon: *If we caused that reaction, Lori's uncle won't be the only person who contacts us . . . .* Two goons in suits and raybans got out of the Geo. They were smoother than the gravrail goons, and scarier. The goons walked up the path to Zevon's front door.

Jams: PERSONAL TO ZEVE, LOOK OUT YOUR WINDOW, THE EAGLES HAVE LANDED. One of Zevon's dads answered the door. The goons flashed ID, and were admitted.

Lori: *What are you raving about?*

Zevon: *Goons at the door.*

Jams managed to duck the G-men, *Opus Dei* guys, or whoever. He packed his knapsack, and then sneaked out the back door as the knock came to his front door. He met Lori. They took the last Greenline gravrail to Manchester.

Jams and Lori, on their way into Nighttown, went past the ankletimer off Pershing. A John Lennon song blared from some old boombox, which surprised Jams. He thought his moms and Zevon's dads were the only people who still gave a fuck about Lennon. "Gimme Some Truth!" All warning signs were drowned in barely dry graffiti. LOS FRACTALS. FUZZY LOGIC. BRAINIACOS. All the surveillance cams had been No. 4 bagged. The ankletimer stood at the window, doing a halfnelson auto-erotic asphyxiation number. "Tedious," Lori called.

Further up the street, they found the Catholic church a brooding and shattered hulk. All windows smashed, sky and stars visible through smashed windows. The windowless windows now looked like the spaces between bones of a ribcage in search of a bird. "Tedious," Lori repeated.

"No." Jams said. "Serioso. My moms have worked with these guys, these guys don't tear nails out—"

"They the Liberation Theologians?"

"Yeah, my moms say they're on the okey-doke."

"Were."

"Yeah. *Were.*"

Jams and Lori managed to evade a kidpack who may or may not have been the kidpack of FUZZY LOGIC he'd managed to evade on Saturday. They found a flea-ridden and musty but dry mattress in an abandoned video shop, of all places, surrounded by bottles covered with spent wax of burnt-out candles. "Fuzzy Logic," Jams said to Lori.

"Scroll up."

"We *created* that kidpack. Other day, when I came through here, I ran

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into them, and they were tagging FUZZY LOGIC all over the place. They were breaking glass and I cut my arm."

"Scroll up. How does that mean *we* created them?"

"We programmed them. We provided context for the media to mulchmix all unsolved crimes and misdemeanors. Childthugs and kidpacks put it in a spoon, cook it, find a vein to hit with it: Safeway mosque, Hollywood Sign, Marina restaurant, the Pershing ankletime wanker's graffiti, that Catholic church fire, and just right *now* . . . ."

After a short time, they smelled smoke. Jams stuck his head out a doorway and looked around. There was a distinct orange glow and billows of smoke, from over the hill, just to the south. One of the old houses. Nobody would come to put the fire out, except maybe the rising tide. "Some fire, burning somewhere, no bigtime. Happens out here."

After a very long while, Lori gazed at Jams. "What can I do . . ."

"Hey. We'll survive."

"Not that," she told him. "My folks. I agreed to meet you because my folks were having a knockdown dragout."

". . . I'm worried about Zeve."

"Ha. Look. If they *were* FBI, we'll get interrogated, maybe some rinkydink misdemeanor. Then a multimedia option. A nanosec of notoriety. Something to help fund that higher education. That is, if anyone even *noticed*."

"That's not what happened to Maria, when the guys in the Geo came. Zeve didn't tell you, but he left his notebook at The Lab. When guys in dark cars come, I can only think about my birthmom."

Lori looked away from Jams. "I forgot."

"I see those hands every day, and I *can't*."

Lori and Jams huddled for warmth, in awkward positioning negotiation of shoulders, elbows, arms, hands, legs, knees. Her breath was hot and minty. When Lori turned over, Jams pressed himself against her back, trying to fold himself into her. Jams wrapped his arms around Lori. Her perfume tickled his nose, so he nuzzled against her to scratch it. He noticed an agenbite of earwax. Jams realized he had cupped his hands on her chest. Her *breasts*. Second base? Lori giggled, at first. Jams became excited. "Think I'm getting a woody."

"Look," Lori finally told Jams. "Truepunky time. I brought along the rest of that quote, coke, unquote. It'll probably help us sleep. If we do a few lines." They did, and it did; even with the biting cold and sandfleas, they were snugly fastasleep within the hour.

Tuesday.

Jams spent a second Nighttown night.

Lori had been caught earlier while attempting to visit her ankletimer

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aunt. (Mrs. Wein, doing the final two years of a ten-year house arrest bank embezzlement sentence in her Inglewood condo.)

Jams managed to get back home, and tried to enter through the back, only to find the locks changed. He went around the front, found the locks changed there, too; also, he noticed that his mom Maria's cactus was gone. Had the goonsquad knocked it over last night? "Hey!"

Jams looked up.

"What are you doing here?"

A blonde woman, at the upstairs bedroom window, *his* bedroom window. Was she the woman his moms had argued about last year?

"If you don't get the fuck out of here, I am calling the police!" Jams ran to a library, checked the jeangenie for newsbytes of Zevon's arrest, or on their project. There was none, but that didn't mean that everything was on the okey-doke, that there wasn't some sort of newsbyte blackout. During blackouts, it was usually only the happy happy on jeangenie. No downsides. So it was odd to read about the mosque by the Safeway being firebombed, about those floating restaurant deaths in Marina Del Rey. And something new, about the Venice Krishna temple barely saved by the bomb squad. (The Islamic fundamentalist org, *Abu Bakr,* was suspected.) But there was no mention of *Los Fractals,* only the Turkish mafia and *Abu Bakr.*

Jams knew how to verify their experiment.

He entered *Florida,* then *Miami,* and then *Crystal Foursquare Church.* He found a newsbyte about an explosion which had destroyed the *Crystal Foursquare Church* and teevee studio during services one Sunday morning, in the year 2000, scattering gamma radiation over several square blocks. There was only one likely source for that kind of blast; with Zevon's notebook, Lori's uncle could figure it out. Zevon was right; it had *worked.* No school record of Malcom yesterday. Much more than netcrash. No Malcom, yesterday, last week, last year, no Malcom, *ever*; only in the memories of Jams, Zevon, and Lori. Jams wished he could erase Malcom from his personal files.

Jams entered *Tunguska.* A pulled-up Sciencebyte told him about scientists baffled by gamma radiation detected at the Tunguska site.

Enola Gay pulled up a World War II Historybyte, about how Nagasaki had been targeted on the 7th of August when the plane due to target Hiroshima vanished, and cited John Hersey's famous book *Nagasaki.*

Johnson, Lyndon referred Jams to a laserdisc of Oliver Stone's controversial film oldie, "LBJ," available from the Manhattan Beach library branch.

Lennon, John pulled up yesterday's newsbyte, about the last surviving Beatle being found dead in his New York apartment, and that he had been dead for weeks.

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Hitler, Adolf pulled up a WW II Historybyte, refering to the death of the founder of Germany's Nazi Party, during a bizarre Munich biergarten explosion in early fall, 1923; how his death galvanized the Party; and referred Jams to *Bormann, German 20th C. History, Holocaust, Nazis, Stalin-Bormann Pact, WW II.*

Jams was curious about Koala Baby. He entered the name, under current news. An amber library monitor message informed him, *Subject not found.* Odd, everyone had newsbytes about Koala Baby. Just yesterday, Koala Baby had gone from Critical back to Serious Condition. If they allowed the Safeway mosque fire, why would there be a newsbyte blackout over Koala Baby? Jams entered the name *Gentech,* and an amber message came up: *Genetic engineering firm, ceased North American operations in 2000, due to factional terrorist extremism and legislative restraints.* Jams queried as to *when* in the year 2000 Gentech ceased North American operations. Neither of Jams's moms had ever said word one about going to Europe to be inseminated. An amber message came up: *Please wait.* A security tank entering the library parking lot may or may not have been a coincidence, but Jams did not stay to find out.

Actually, Jams did not know whether Lori had been caught. She never returned to the rendezvous point. Which wasn't like Lori. Jams assumed the worst. The tide rose up, beyond the beach, past the old Vista Del Mar road. Seaweed tangling into an old signpost, starkly etched in yellow moonlight, looked wraithlike, like Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth. Jams was more careful tonight, never having been alone in Nighttown after dark. As always, he carried his Victorinox Swiss Army knife, saw blade, first aid kit, laptop, roll of No. 4 plastic trashbags in his knapsack, money, the rest of Lori's heroin-coke cocktail, two tins of rainbow trout, a caviar jar, matzoh crackers. Up the hill, the kidpacks could be heard, calling to each other.

Jams passed the old pizza shop he'd explored Saturday. He heard the same, distant noises, scratching, digging, from outside. Even with the ocean's night breeze, it was still warm. Signs and buildings look clearer, more focused, in the dark, in the stark moonlight. Simpler. Bled or leached of what little sunbleached colors they barely had by day.

Someone was handcuffed to a lamp post like a martyred saint. Just another geekfreak in a leathermask. Whatever. Jams crossed the street. Went up to the geekfreak.

"My birthmom's ancestors tore the hearts from chosen victims."

The geekfreak did not seem to register his presence. Maybe the geekfreak only responded to his "Master"—or maybe this was part of some fraternity hazing.

"Hey!"

Jams poked the geekfreak in the ribs and got no response. This one

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was really disciplined. Kinky. Jams put the rest of Lori's narcotic stash into one of the geekfreak's pockets.

"I'd like to kill you," Jams told the masked geekfreak. "But you'd enjoy it too much."

No answer. This geekfreak was bigtime creepy.

Jams crossed back, called to the masked geekfreak: "Instead, I'll inform the authorities that you're carrying controlled substances."

The surveillance vidcam tower looked like the Safeway minaret in the moonlight. He once saw a documentary, where ten thousand faithful prayed on persian rugs and ignored delegations of stray cats pestering them for food. Jams couldn't make out the bird nests. He recalled something Lori told him about Islam. About infibulation (how an Islamic woman has half her clit cut off). That Islam translated as *submission*. But Lori's mom had been a Sufi, once, twice, and Jams wondered about that.

A ferret passed Jams. Just like Saturday. Then a dog. Different ferret. Same dog. Same mangy dog, same eyeless eye swollen nearly shut. Jams followed them up the same sand dune. He didn't shout, not the best of ideas when alone in dark Nighttown.

Jams saw his house below him. Saw that this was what had been set on fire, last night, while Jams and Lori snorted and then slept. Its roof was a charred ruin, the walls scorched black. Though, even with the scorching, Jams could read FUZZY LOGIC on the back wall. Besides the rot and salt of the sea, he smelled the burnt wood of the house. Low on the horizon. The moon. Beyond the Santa Monica Bay. La Luna. Sinking into the Pacific Ocean. Leaving a broken mirror. Jams thought about the curve of the earth, briefly. Thought about their science project. Thought about Zevon and Lori, in FBI custody. Having their nails torn out. About Zevon targeting Florida, Miami, the Crystal Foursquare Church and teevee studio, on a Sunday morning in the year 2000 (where Malcom's father had begun his ministry). He wished they'd stuck with the Siberian forest.

Jams recalled finding the Tunguska byte, from the board; recalled Lori's uncle telling them about a Soviet institute sucking on Stalin's tit for decades by concocting Weird Science. Telling Lori, Jams, and Zevon about a twin U.S. Air Force institute that had done the same scam with antigravity. Jams wondered what might happen if they'd miscalculated, missed Tunguska by a few thousand miles and a decade or so. Maybe hit Lenin's train as it smuggled him from Germany into Russia. (In which case, those guys in the Geo would have been a KGB equivalent. Like an old Sci Fi Channel download. Maybe more like the *Opus Dei* goons who'd come after his birthmom, Maria.) But Zevon'd targeted A through F. Malcom, Malcom's father, rather, presented no problem. Hell, Zevon and

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Lori and Jams would all have been safely womb-bound on the targeted date. Lori had double-checked the dates in question. *Still,* that library message about Gentech, about Gentech going out of business in the year 2000, and the request to please wait, followed by the security tank's appearance in the library parking lot . . . .

An airbus roared overhead, its metal mass blotting out the stars. They were not supposed to fly over Nighttown at this hour. Jams looked back at the scorched wall, found that the graffiti was gone. Of course.

Jams heard the ferret. Its desperate screeching. Jams saw the dog, its ferret in its jaws. The good canis. Stoopard canis. Shaking its head. Blood and fur flying, falling. Then the ferret was dead. The dog finally let the ferret drop. Turned to Jams and barked, even growled a bit. Then calmed down. Came up toward Jams.

Jams thought of an experiment, a "reality check," as his mom Maria might have put it. Jams was frightened, sort of, under the swaddling of the two-hour old mestizo line of heroin and coke. "Good canis." Zevon knew how to do this sort of thing better, he'd taught Jams. The dog tilted its tail, wagged its head.

The dog followed him to the garage. Jams leaned against the garage back door (blistered from the heat of the inferno). The setting moon shone through the opened front of the garage.

The dog followed. Then stopped, sat. Nodded its tail, wagged its head. Jams peered into the garage. Saw oily pools reflect the splintered moon. Everything soaked, sodden. A weak cry made Jams turn. The ferret, still alive after all, was unable to move, having been disassembled, so to speak. The dog barked, tail wagging, as it waited for Jams to pat it on the head or play with it.

"Nice canis." Jams found the Victorinox Swiss Army Classic, went to the dog. "*Stoopard* canis." Bent. Patted the dog. Opened his Classic knifeblade. Scratched the dog's ears with one hand.

"Goooood canis." With his other hand. Took the knife. Thrust upward from under the dog's chin. Drove the knifeblade in up to the hilt. To the little white cross. Stabbed through the dog's nice and goooood and stoopard throat and into its nice and gooood and stoopard brain. Only, the dog's death didn't quite *go.* The dog's death didn't go at all. Jams saw his fisted hand follow the knife, saw his wrist and forearm follow hand and knife, up *through* the dog's head. Stoopard stoopard stoopard, a voice echoed. His mom Maria's? Unharmed, untouched, the nice and gooood and stoopard dog began to bark again, to growl, and took off in search of fresh ferrets. Jams, in stunned shock, watched him go. The changed locks, the strange woman at *his* window, the missing cactus, the library info on Gentech, the non-response from an eager masochist, the graffiti

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that faded and disappeared, the non-murder of a murderous dog. Stoppard. His ticket had been punched by the space-time usher. Jams was dead, to this world.

Jams heard the fading nightcry of fading kidpacks. And something else. A distant wailing, a joybundle's squall. He imagined Koala Baby, and the lime green rockinrider. Guilt, and wind. Jams turned back to the sandy dune of a hill, saw Malcom. Malcom, who no longer (and, arguably, never *had*) existed. Malcom in Nighttown. Malcom was as real as Jams now. At least Jams would get another stab at the little fuck. Malcom ran toward a distant kidpack, on the edge of the sandy dune of a hill, and Jams followed. One step sent sand sliding down the dune. Malcom flickered, faded in and out.

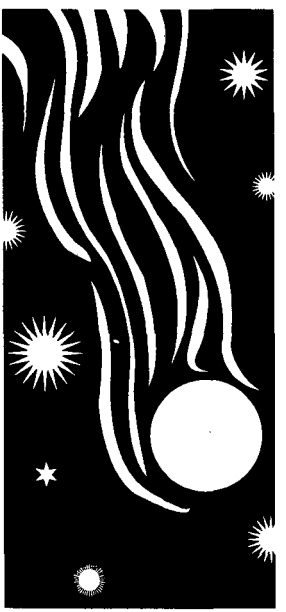
Jams's next step, in this world, had no impact. ●

Note: Special thanks to John Cramer & Jonathan Post for weird science advice.

THE METEORITE

I saw a star flare out
not half a house above the ground;
no thin, silver streak
drawing itself in the sky,
but a small gold ball
trailing yellow flames,
a puff of red embers,
and darkness
seen over my shoulder
across a field
on the far side of the highway.

What could have brought my car
streaking the speed limit west
on an eastward turning ball
and that rock falling
all those millions of miles
together for that instant
just to remind me
life
has no instant replays.



—William John Watkins

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Alan Gordon

DIGITAL MUSIC

Alan Gordon is a criminal defense lawyer for the Legal Aid Society who lives in Queens, New York, with his wife, Judy Downer, and their three-year-old son Robert. While he's had a number of stories published in Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, "Digital Music" is his first science fiction sale.

Illustration by Gary Freeman

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You're not breathing," said Jang. The young woman looked up from the piano.

"I don't understand," she said. "What does breathing have to do with it?"

"When you are working with an oboist, you have to anticipate his breathing," he explained. "The phrasing, the expression, the speaking of the horn all depend on the breath. If you breathe together, you phrase together."

"But how do I know when he's going to breathe?"

"Ask him. You usually breathe in the same places, don't you?" asked Jang. The oboist nodded. "That's what rehearsals are for. First, go over the breathing together. Then you'll get to a point where you'll know when it will happen without even thinking."

"I wish I was telepathic," she said. "It would be easier."

"Easier, yes," said Jang. "But not better. If you anticipate too much, then you lose the spontaneity. Ideally, even long-time collaborators can still surprise and challenge each other, and enjoy doing it. And their pleasure will then be communicated to and shared by the audience."

"You make it sound like making love," she said shyly. He smiled.

"If you reach that level," he said. "Sometimes it's even better." And it's been a long time since I have felt it either in music or in sex, he thought ruefully. "Let's try it again."

She watched the oboist carefully as she played. He signaled his breaths with exaggerated nods of his head at first, but gradually they became unnecessary. When they finished the movement, Jang nodded approvingly. "You felt it a little, didn't you?"

"Definitely," she said.

"Good. Keep working, and I will see you on Friday."

There was a soft tapping at the door. Jang looked up to see Lenefsky standing outside his studio. He motioned her in and waved her to a seat in front of his desk. The students finished packing up and left. Jang walked stiffly from the piano to his chair, opened a drawer and removed his aspirin bottle. "Would you mind?" he said, handing it to her. She popped it open easily and passed it back. He poured two pills onto his hand.

"Arthritis acting up?" she asked.

"Just feeling my venerable self," he said, swallowing.

"What did you think of her?" she said, indicating the student.

"She'll make an adequate accompanist, and Lord knows we need them. She's accepted it as her lot in life."

"Which means she never would have done better," commented Lenefsky.

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"No, she lacks the combination of talent, arrogance and self-delusion that you need to be a classical soloist in this strange age."

"Speaking of which, I want you to hear something. You know I trust your ears more than anyone's." She slid a cartridge across the desk. He placed it in the player and turned it on. Piano, one of Liszt's Transcendental Études. His bent fingers twitched along involuntarily. Muscle memory, he thought. Like an old faithful hound limping along after the hunt, far, far behind. He forced himself to concentrate on the music, and was pleasantly surprised to find himself enjoying it.

"Excellent," he said when it was over. "Superb technique, and a good, thoughtful approach."

"I agree," she said. "Should we accept him for the Watts?"

"Of course. Don't you think so?"

"Yes. But there is one interesting little complication. Look at this." She handed him an application form.

"Juilliard," he said, reading aloud. "Top honors in theory, history, solo and chamber performance. Studied with Kanagawa and Stiles. No problem there, they're both my students. Before Juilliard, he was . . . ah."

"Ah, indeed," she said. "He's a Garsh. We've never had a Garsh compete in the Watts before. Personally, I have no problem, but some people, and I specifically mean people, will think he has an unfair advantage."

"I've always said that if you want to play Liszt well, you need fourteen fingers."

"And the Garsh have them. I was thinking about blind judging this year. We've never done it before."

"The judges won't agree to it. You know they like to watch the pianists' hands. I like to watch them, too."

"And when one pair of hands is blue, scaly, and has four extra fingers?"

Jang shrugged. "I would hope that the judging is on merit alone."

"You know better," she replied. "Germans are more likely to win at the Munich, and Russians at the Tchaikovsky. And a hometown bias is nothing compared to a home planet's. I think there may be trouble. I just got an informal call from the State Department asking us to keep things as smooth as possible. We're supposedly on good terms with the Garsh, but there's a lot of hostility beneath the surface."

"Well, he made it this far on merit. Let's hope it continues."

"Would you come with me to the board meeting? I could use your support."

"I'd better bring these," he said, pocketing the aspirin bottle.

As they walked to the conference room, he paused to watch a workman post the annual announcement of the Watts Competition. There was the famous photograph from, when, the nineteen fifties? That rampageous

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old lion, Bernstein, introducing to a stunned television audience a slender, dignified young black man who proceeded to break every barrier in sight through his sheer virtuosity. It took courage on Bernstein's part, and on Watts's part as well. But you needed courage to be a musician at all. Thinking that, Jang straightened his spine and strode into the room, swinging his cane jauntily as if it were an accoutrement rather than a necessity.

Warm greetings all around. All of them here. Good, not surprising. This was that rare board that was actually devoted to the engendering of music, not to padding their societal resumes. Sit by the director and let her do her job. Smooth presentation of her report. Pass the list of accepted contestants around. No comments about the Garsh yet. Good Lord, is she going to finesse this one? No, she's just waiting for one of them to bring it up. There. Tannen, down at the end of the table, raising his eyebrows but saying nothing. Maybe Walsh . . . yes, there he goes, the California vintner with the roomful of Strads, starting to foam at the mouth.

"A Garsh? A Garsh competing at the Watts? But, surely that's not allowed, is it?"

"The rules state that the competition is open to anyone under thirty, regardless of race, creed, color, or national origin," responded Lenefsky.

"But shouldn't we change them? It hardly seems fair. They have a built-in advantage."

"Yes," said another member. "All those kids who've worked so hard for this with only ten fingers. How are they supposed to react?"

"It's not fair at all," agreed a third. Lenefsky glanced at Jang, who cleared his throat.

"If I may be heard," he began politely. The board paid respectful attention. "Sixty-two years ago, I was fortunate enough to win the gold medal at the first Watts Competition. At the time, I had been living and studying in this country for eight years, just as this young Garsh pianist has been. As a Korean, I had been subject to a certain amount of comment from American musicians, and a great deal more from their parents, who felt that so many of 'us,' meaning Koreans, Japanese, and others lumped into a single Asian mass, had an unfair advantage because our parents had us practicing longer and more diligently at a much earlier age than was customary here. Much of this was, of course, a myth. But the bias lingered. It wasn't until I won the Watts that I was appreciated on my own merits.

"Now, it is true that the Garsh have fourteen fingers. But they still have to learn how to use them, and use them on instruments and music that are much more alien to them than the European tradition was for

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me. They can't even play our wind instruments because of the peculiarities of their manner of breathing and the shape of their mouths."

"Thank God we can keep something," snapped Walsh. Jang looked at him sadly.

"All I am saying," he continued, "is that this young Garsh is ready to compete here, and deserves the opportunity. It would violate the spirit of the competition, indeed desecrate the memory of the man for whom it is named, to exclude him on the basis of planetary origin."

"It would violate the rules, as well," said Lenefsky. "I don't have to do this, but I am putting it to a vote. All in favor?" All hands but two went up. "Opposed?" Walsh raised his defiantly, joined by one of the members who had spoken in support of him earlier. "The Garsh will compete. And let's all stop referring him to as the Garsh. His name is Diep N'Tloden. The inflection is important. I'll see you at the competition."

The meeting broke up. Jang walked out with Lenefsky in time to hear one board member remark, "I hear he's flawless technically."

"Well, they *all* are, aren't they?" sniffed her companion.

"Round one to us," commented Lenefsky. "Thank you."

"It's just beginning," said Jang. "These are the more enlightened people. Wait until the press gets hold of it. Ridiculous."

"Deep in your heart of hearts, do you think it's unfair?"

He laughed. "I thought it was unfair that Horowitz could reach a fourteenth while I could only get a tenth."

"N'Tloden can reach two octaves."

"Lord save us," sighed Jang.

"Ever wish you had fourteen fingers?"

"No," he said, looking at his hands. "I just wish that the ten I have still worked."

The media had the story in time for the evening news. The morning tabloids emblazoned it on the front page. One notorious Earth-First daily had a cruel little ditty: "Eight foot two, solid blue, but oh what those fourteen fingers can do. Has anybody seen this Garsh?" Attempts to interview N'Tloden were rebuffed. A Juilliard spokesperson came out to say that he was concentrating on practicing and would not speak to the press. His competitors were less reluctant, and voiced opinions that ranged from encouraging to intolerant. Jang guessed that the more intolerant the pianist, the more fearful he or she was of N'Tloden's talent.

By the time the contestants arrived for the competition a week later, the publicity had built to near-hysteria. Requests for press passes came from print and video media that had never paid any attention to classical music before. Lenefsky, taking advantage of the exposure for the school, provided for pooled coverage. The seats available to the public sold out within minutes.

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Jang went alone to the auditorium. His wife had died ten years before, and his children and grandchildren were scattered across the planet. Across the galaxy, he corrected himself, remembering his granddaughter in the Rigel system. She had assigned a precious portion of her weight ration to her violin and her library of disks. He hoped they survived the trip.

There were several pianists performing before N'Tloden. Jang, along with the rest of the audience, tried to guess who would survive this round. An intense, blond boy, undone by nerves. A calm brunette woman—too calm, thought Jang. It won't be enough. A confident Asian teenager—good technique, smart choices. She'll go on. Korean, he guessed from the name, and felt a momentary lapse into pride. Stop that, he berated himself. The next three were competent but not special. Then it was time for the Garsh.

He glanced down at his program to see what N'Tloden had chosen for the solo round. Liszt, of course. If you have the technique, blow away the opposition. Well, his technique better be phenomenal if he thinks he can take on Étude VIII from the Transcendental Études. *Wilde Jagd, Presto furioso.* A wild hunt indeed, at a pace that sent most pianists crashing to the earth when they attempted to leap its hazards. And that's just in getting all of the notes from page to head to fingers to keys. There's still the music at the heart of it.

Some nervous tittering from the audience. The stage manager, always over-serious in concerts, was removing the piano bench. He returned pushing a structure that resembled a bench on steroids, heavily reinforced. How big was this Garsh?

The question was answered immediately as N'Tloden strode onto the stage. Respectful applause, but some outright gasps. He acknowledged both with an abrupt nod. I can't read his expressions, thought Jang, feeling slightly dazed. Scorn? Irony? Or just nerves. What an enormous creature, and the color. A shade of blue rare even in nature, at least on this planet. Certainly a tailcoat never seemed more aptly named, he mused as he stared at the enormous appendage jutting out from under it. The attempt at European formal wear was embarrassing. There is no European garb that can handle a tail successfully. The Garsh sat on his bench, his tail curling around and under it. Music, old fellow, Jang reminded himself. That's what matters. Listen. He closed his eyes and waited.

Fast and fortissimo from the start, yet even at that mad gallop he managed to build from it, using the rapid linked octave runs to carry along the listener. The descending chromatics were tossed off with an incredibly light touch, and Jang was compelled to open his eyes to see how N'Tloden had managed the fingering. There was a sense of nobility,

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of a formality imposed on a mass of underlying, uninhibited passion, straining against the structure of the piece, ready to burst forth. He held the tempo and volume in check, and the shifting accents were handled so effortlessly as to seem playful.

That was what impressed him about the Garsh. The technique was evident, but it wasn't the emphasis of his playing. He had reached a level where Jang found himself listening to the music rather than admiring the skill. The contrasts in volume developed logically, and each theme both commented on and was influenced by the one preceding. By the time he returned to the first tempo, Jang had decided that if he made it through the last section at the same level of playing, there would be no stopping him.

He soared through the octave jumps and launched into the final agitato. Even the piano section was precise, noted Jang. It's much harder to play soft than loud, especially at that speed. The thundering eighth note chords of the 2/4 led into the impossible arpeggios of the 6/8, and the piece descended into the crashing chords of the bass clef with, at the very last, a glorious ritardo into the ultimate chord which he sustained for a time that defied the acoustics of the hall.

When he finally lifted his hands from the keyboard, the audience sat in stunned silence.

An appropriate response, thought Jang appreciatively. Applause is cheap, standing ovations self-serving. This is real. Then someone booed.

Jang was outraged. More boos scattered about the hall. He leapt to his feet and started pounding his bent hands together, shouting "Bravo!" at the top of his lungs, startling the people in the adjoining seats. Others, relieved, joined him, and the cheers quickly drowned out the boos.

The Garsh stood, looked in his direction for a moment, then bowed briefly and left the stage.

It was the last performance of this round. The audience filed out, talking excitedly to each other. Jang forced his way to the side exits and headed backstage, but N'Tloden was gone. Lenefsky caught up with him.

"Incredible technique," she shouted over the hubbub. "I thought you'd be impressed."

"The hell with the technique," he replied. "The music. It must have been how it sounded inside Liszt's head when he composed it. Maybe better. And those animals had the audacity to boo him. Ridiculous. There hasn't been a pianist like him in thirty years."

"I don't know about that, but he'll certainly make the finals. We have tomorrow's contestants to get through first, but I think that's a safe bet."

"I think a gold is a safe bet."

"Don't get carried away," she cautioned. "There's a lot more than music

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going on here. I took a look at the judges while he played. Some of them didn't seem too happy."

"Probably because he can outplay any of them."

"That won't endear him to them. And I think Walsh has been doing a little whispering."

"I wish that didn't matter."

"Good night, Jang."

The morning papers competed with each other in denouncing N'Tloden's performance. "A mere technical display with no heart," said one. "He antagonized the audience with a single glare," complained another. Jang began to wonder if they had been at the same concert. He hoped N'Tloden didn't read the papers.

He taught his roster of pupils diligently, trying not to drift into replaying the Garsh's performance in his mind. At four o'clock, he closed his studio door and wandered through the halls, beaming at former students who had returned to see the competition and roam their old school. As he passed the stairway leading to the practice rooms, two young women came down, chattering.

"Where do you suppose the lizard is?" said one.

"Probably practicing his *scales*," shot back the other, and the two burst into laughter which followed them down the hallway.

The second woman was the Korean pianist from the previous night. Jang was disgusted.

Curious, he made his way slowly up the steps, pausing to catch his breath at the top. The muffled sounds of a dozen pianists filtered through the walls, all in a frenzy of speed. N'Tloden's performance was having an impact on the competition.

From the end of the hall, however, one pianist was playing slowly, clearly, a still, cool lake amidst the surrounding turbulence. Jang had trouble identifying the composer. Joplin, he remembered finally. He was annoyed by his inability to name the piece. Who would be playing Joplin here? He walked down the hall until he located the source and peeked through the window. It was the Garsh.

The music was sad, almost agonizingly slow, and swelled against a quirky rhythm in the left hand. The left hand in this case barely moved, easily encompassing the full range of the bass clef, taking away the jumps that a normal pianist would need to make, linking the notes more closely. Jang waited until the Garsh had finished playing, then tapped respectfully on the door. The Garsh looked over at him, then slowly stood. He was wearing a loose, flowing robe of shiny, tangerine-colored material that draped over his tail. A necklace made of a braided substance resembling ivory held a large pendant on his chest. Jang received a closer look at the pendant because the Garsh's chest was directly in front of him as

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he opened the door. It depicted a piano against a background of the Milky Way.

"I apologize for intruding," said Jang politely. "But I could not remember the name of that piece. Joplin, of course, but it's been a long time, and I am an old man."

" 'Solace,' " said N'Tloden. "Also known as 'Mexican Serenade.' "

"Of course. Thank you. My name is Jang, by the way. I teach here."

To his astonishment, N'Tloden knelt before him, bowing his head. "You do me great honor, sir. I have spent many happy and instructive hours listening to your recordings and reading your essays. And now that I know who it was who led the applause last night, I am overwhelmed by your kindness."

"Please, stand up," said Jang, embarrassed. "It wasn't kindness. You played superbly. I only gave you your due. I was remembering last night the story about Beethoven toward the end of his life hearing Liszt play for the first time. Liszt was eleven, but already such a prodigy that Beethoven kissed him after his performance." There was a long pause. Jang laughed. "Don't worry, I won't kiss you. It's not my style at all."

"I am relieved," admitted N'Tloden. "It is not part of my culture, and my one or two experiences with human kissing have been uninspiring on my part, and bruising for the recipients. I suppose having lips makes a difference."

"It does," agreed Jang. "Well, refreshing to hear Joplin in these hallowed halls. So many pianists seem to concentrate on the Top Forty approach to the literature. The usual warhorses get trotted out yet again."

"I wanted to play 'Solace' for an encore at Juilliard, but my teacher advised me against it. I have never quite understood the reluctance of classical audiences to expand their horizons."

"Snobbery. Avoidance of dissonance. Listen to what you're told is good for you, and go mad over speed."

N'Tloden looked down. "They aren't really listening to me, then. Just timing me."

"Nonsense. I'm sorry, the speed comment wasn't addressed to you. What impressed me about your performance was the interpretation. The music, not the notes. What was going through your mind in that piece? Was it a hunt?"

"Not so much a hunt, but what a hunt symbolized," said N'Tloden. "The veneer of civilization over the barely repressed primitive aggressions. The inhibitions held in check by the formality. But at the same time, almost a mourning for that past, a sense that you've lost something essential. It was difficult to convey."

"Well, you succeeded, at least in my opinion. Have you ever hunted?"

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"It has never been part of our heritage. Strictly an agrarian society. Humans have trouble believing us. We resemble prehistoric carnivores, my friends tell me. But look at the teeth." He grimaced, a frightening sight. "Made for grinding, not for tearing. I wish the audience could see past my appearance."

"You have to make them listen."

"I thought the music would be enough. But all they ever talk about is the technique."

"Would you like some advice?" asked Jang. "It isn't my place, but since you mention it. . . ."

"Please."

"Then come with me." The Garsh collected his music and ducked through the doorway. Jang led him back to his studio. N'Tloden gazed reverently at the ancient photographs of Jang in his prime, performing with some of the great musicians of the century. Jang found the cartridge he was looking for, and popped it into the player. "This was done as an experiment a number of years ago. You're about to hear two recordings of 'The Mephisto Waltz.' Listen closely." The first version coursed through the room. When it ended, N'Tloden nodded.

"Excellent," he said.

"Now, the second," said Jang. The recording was almost identical, but more precise. When it ended, the Garsh looked puzzled.

"Which did you like better?" asked Jang, smiling.

The Garsh hesitated. "The first player made mistakes. Several. The second, as far as I could tell, made none. But the first recording was better. I cannot be clear as to why. It was richer. It spoke to me more."

"Good," said Jang. "The first was a human pianist, flaws and all. The second recording was made by taking the first, analyzing it note by note, recreating it exactly, but correcting the mistakes by computer. If you compare the sound waves side by side, you wouldn't be able to detect any difference. But everyone who has heard this prefers the first one, even with the mistakes. I think it's because music was made by humans for humans, not for machines. Each performance is unique, a quest for something that may never be achieved perfectly. But in the attempt lies the greatness, both of the composer and of the player. The greatness of the former is in how he stirs the greatness of the latter. And the rest of us get to listen, and try and understand both."

The Garsh looked down. "Made by humans for humans," he said. "Then perhaps I will never achieve it."

"My definition of human is anyone who likes the first recording better," said Jang gently.

The Garsh suddenly knelt in front of him again. "May I see your hands?" he asked. Jang held them out, trying his best to unclench his

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fists, struggling against the gnarled tendons. N'Tloden held them in his enormous hands, examining them. "That was you playing on the first recording," he whispered. Jang nodded. "I am sorry."

Jang shrugged. "Happens to us all. At least on this planet. But they gave me great pleasure for a long time, both on the keys and off. I was able to make music."

The Garsh stood. "Thank you for speaking with me. I have much to think about." He bowed. Jang bowed back, and the Garsh left. Jang opened his drawer and reached for his aspirin bottle. He found instead a pile of small, easily openable plastic envelopes, each containing two pills. On top was a note from Lenefsky. "Just in case I'm not around," it read.

He listened dutifully at that evening's round of competitors, but none stirred him the way N'Tloden had. There was a flutter of anticipation while the judges consulted, then the six finalists were announced. N'Tloden was one. Sandra Kim, the Korean woman, was another. A Russian, an Australian, and two Americans, one Hispanic and one white, completed the list.

Lenefsky knocked on his door the next day. "Thought you'd want to hear the list of concertos for the finals."

"All right."

"The usual suspects. Rocky I, II, *and* III, the Prokofiev First, the Emperor."

"An evening of pyrotechnics," he muttered, then he saw her smiling at him. "Wait, that was five." Her smile broadened. "What is N'Tloden playing?"

"Mozart. The D Minor concerto," she said.

"Is he?" he said delightedly. "Is he indeed? What a magnificent choice!"

"It may cost him the competition," she said. "Especially after throwing down the gauntlet in the prelims."

"But it isn't about who can finish first with the most notes," he protested.

"Tell it to the judges. I like the choice, too, but not many people think like you and me nowadays."

He gazed at her fondly. "If I were thirty years younger," he began.

"Then you'd be chasing after a twenty year old. But I would like you to sit with me Friday night."

"It's a date."

He stayed away from the practice halls the next two days, wanting badly to hover outside the doors and listen to the contestants rehearse with the orchestra. Lenefsky surprised him with a dinner invitation, taking him to an Indian restaurant. When they arrived at the concert hall, the street outside was jammed. Earth-Firsters screamed. Scalpers

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screamed louder. The press gleefully covered it all. Not wanting to brave the crowd, they went in the Academy entrance and entered the concert hall through a connecting tunnel.

The order had been selected at random. The word from the orchestra was that Kim was playing like she had never played before, obsessed with beating N'Tloden. The other four were considered to be in contention for the bronze. Kim would be playing third and N'Tloden fifth.

Jang applauded the concertmistress and the conductor, and waited.

A dutiful rendering of the Rachmaninoff First.

A competent performance of the Emperor Concerto.

Sandra Kim took the stage by force, surging through the string section, bowing fiercely to the audience. Cheers before she even started. She sat down at the piano, nodded brusquely, and launched into the Rachmaninoff Third. She attacked the keys, pounding the chords, pushing it faster and faster. There was a certain crude energy in her performance that excited many in the audience. She fed on their excitement, propelling the tempo well past any margin for error. The conductor kept shooting glances at her that were ignored, finally resigning himself to keeping the orchestra at her speed. It was reckless, daredevil playing, devoid of caution or moderation, but somehow she pulled it off. At the end, she stood defiantly before the piano, and a substantial portion of the audience leapt to their feet, screaming.

"Too bombastic," said Lenefsky, applauding politely.

"She got all the notes. All that's missing is the music," agreed Jang as they rose for the intermission.

The encountered Walsh in the lobby. "How about that little girl!" he crowed. "Did all that with ten fingers! God, what a performance."

"It certainly was," said Jang diplomatically.

"I think she's going places. I've been talking with a couple of key managements, and they're very excited. It'll be quite a story if she wins. This is the stuff of legends, don't you think?"

"We still have to hear the rest of the contestants," said Lenefsky.

"In the bag," said Walsh. "Mark my words, history is being made tonight."

They watched him work the crowd, pumping hands like a professional greeter.

"History is written by the winners," commented Jang. "Let's go back inside."

A rather good Prokofiev First, and then the stage manager removed the piano bench and brought in N'Tloden's. The audience stirred in anticipation. Then gasped as he entered.

The formal Earth clothing was gone. He strode on stage wearing scarlet robes that shimmered and set off his blue skin. The fabric draped the tail as well. The pendant was on his chest.

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Garsh formal wear, guessed Jang. Good. He wasn't trying to fit in. Let's see what you do with the Mozart, my boy.

Mozart's Concerto Number 20 in D Minor, K. 466. Not the most technically challenging work. All you have to do is produce absolute beauty on the piano. That's all. N'Tloden nodded at the conductor, and the orchestra began.

The theme was started almost perfunctorily by the orchestra, thought Jang. Maybe they don't consider it challenging enough after the previous fireworks. N'Tloden sat motionless at the piano, eyes closed. As the theme drew to a close, he lifted his hands and began to play.

The same theme sounded different on the piano. Reflective, detached, almost isolated. He played with simplicity and clarity, letting the music speak through him. The pianist is alone before the orchestra, thought Jang. Several dozen musicians synchronized, one soloist out in front. What did someone say about this piece, that it expressed the lonely world of a soul? That was being expressed now. The first cadenza came, a brooding, original development of the theme, dark and soaring, posing questions, seeking answers. The movement ended quietly, the pianist as alone at the end as he had been at the beginning.

The second movement, the Romanza. N'Tloden began. No pyrotechnics, just sheer, transcendent beauty. The orchestra echoed him more, his playing capturing the musicians. The center of the movement, turbulent, heartbreaking. Then the piano and the orchestra started sending fragments back and forth, true interplay for the first time in the piece.

Then came the Rondo. The theme stated strongly, a challenge and an invitation by the piano. Surging independently, only to be drawn back into the orchestra. The first cadenza came. A curious one, thought Jang. It seemed to draw on the entire history of the piano rather than the Classical period. He thought he heard a hint of ragtime, and then something unlike any music he had ever heard before. It was a plea, thought Jang. The need to be accepted as one's self. The orchestra rejoined him, and the music was passed between the piano and the flutes and oboes. N'Tloden breathed with them, turning the piano into a living creature, almost as if he was its instrument rather than the other way around. The last cadenza resolved the questions posed, and the loneliness ended. The orchestra accepted him on his terms. The fury broke, the piece shifted into major, and ended on joy. And Jang found himself weeping for the first time in years.

The applause was more respectful than enthusiastic. N'Tloden nodded to the audience, looked over toward Jang, and then bowed.

Jang barely noticed the last contestant.

The wait for the decision seemed to stretch on for hours. Finally, the

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judges and the contestants filed onto the stage. N'Tloden was awarded the silver medal; Kim, the gold. The audience went wild.

At the reception, Jang wandered about the room glowering. He encountered one of the judges, a winner from two decades ago.

"How could you do it?" Jang demanded. "Caving in to prejudice like that."

"Come on, now," said the other. "What about the degree of difficulty? I like the Mozart, don't get me wrong, but I could play that with nine fingers."

"No," said Jang, considering. "No, you couldn't." The other walked away.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to see Sandra Kim smiling before him.

"I've always wanted to meet you, Mr. Jang," she said.

"Congratulations," he said politely. "You played quite well."

"Thank you. That means a lot, coming from you." She glanced around the room, then dropped her voice. "I'm particularly glad I could keep it in the family. You must be proud."

Jang was puzzled. "What do you mean?"

She dropped her voice even further. "That a fellow Korean won."

"If you were in my family, I would disown you for that remark," said Jang coolly. "Good evening." He left her fuming.

He saw N'Tloden standing with his back turned at a corner of the room. He hurried over. "My dear boy," he began. Then the Garsh turned. It wasn't N'Tloden. "My apologies," stammered Jang. "I thought you were . . . I'm sorry."

"It is not necessary," answered the Garsh. "I understand that we look alike to humans."

"Not at all," protested Jang. "You had your back turned." It sounded feeble. "Are you a relative of Diep N'Tloden?"

"His father," replied the Garsh. "My name is Diep N'Tnagu."

"Paul Jang."

"I am pleased to meet you. My son spoke of you. He said that you were of great assistance to him. I am grateful."

"I did very little. He played beautifully. He has a great talent."

"It is nice of you to say. I have no understanding of this music, so I must rely on the opinions of others. Do you agree with the results of the competition?"

"No," said Jang. "Your son deserved to win."

"Then why did he lose?"

Jang hesitated. "I would like to put it down to a poor selection by the judges. But I honestly believe that it was bias against a Garsh."

N'Tnagu was silent for a long moment. "I have never understood his

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desire to pursue this career. This repetition of tones written centuries ago, that have been played the same way so many times."

"Don't you have music on your planet?"

"It is new each time. Every performance expresses the moment, and the skill of the performer lies in his ability to allow the audience to see the wonder of that moment. To write it down or record it would destroy the experience."

"Nothing but improvisation? No structure?"

"There are approved structures, but only in a very general sense."

"Knowing that, I admire your son's achievements even more. It must have been tremendously difficult for him to adapt to such a radically different approach."

N'Tnagu was silent again. "It was very hard," he said finally. "He actually broke the first piano we obtained for him. They are not designed for our strength. The mere act of playing requires a tremendous amount of restraint. His desire confounded us, but we let him continue. Do you think he has a future in it?"

"He should."

N'Tloden came upon them. "Have I disappointed you, Father?" he asked.

N'Tnagu glanced at Jang, then back at his son. "How do you think you played?"

N'Tloden took a deep breath. "I am angry with the judging, but I am satisfied with the performance."

"Then so am I. Mr. Jang has told me that you did well, and I accept his evaluation."

"What next?" asked Jang. "Have you a management yet?"

"No," said N'Tloden. "I had been approached by a few, but they seemed more interested in exploiting the novelty of a Garsh pianist. I overheard one describe it as a dog and pony show. It took me three days to track down what that meant."

"Obscene," said Jang. "I'll tell you what, would you consider me?"

"Managing me? But you are not a manager of musicians."

"No, but I'd be willing. I still have quite a few connections. And if you will accept the opinions of an old man and lesser pianist, I would be happy to coach you as well. Or just be a sounding board."

"And if I want to play Joplin for an encore?"

"Encore, hell. Put it in the main program. With me, you can play whatever you want. I just want to be there to hear it."

N'Tloden thought for a second, then bowed to Jang. "It would be an honor."

"Enough of that," said Jang. "I'm working for you, now. Only I'm too old and stiff to bow, so let's leave it at a handshake."

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The crippled human hand was engulfed in the enormous Garsh one. "Two octaves," breathed Jang admiringly. N'Tloden shook his head. "An exaggeration," he informed Jang. "I can only reach a fifteenth." "It'll do." ●

—for Anita and Louis Gordon, June 1993

NEXT ISSUE

Critically acclaimed British author **Brian Stableford,** who has become a frequent contributor here in recent years, returns to these pages next month with our lead story for October, and perhaps his best work to date, a compelling and powerful new novella called "Les Fleurs du Mal." In it, Stableford takes us deep into a high-tech future whose decadent, ultrarich inhabitants have almost the power of gods... but even gods occasionally dabble in obsession and revenge, and *murder,* and when murder most foul (and *most* peculiar) begins to stalk through this calm and prosperous future Utopia, it's up to two very unusual and mismatched detectives to cry "The game's afoot!" and track the killer down—if they *can.* Set against a fascinating and richly imagined future society, this is an ingenious, clever, and suspenseful high-tech murder mystery you will *not* want to miss!

ALSO IN OCTOBER: new writer **Eliot Fintushel** makes a wild and wooly *Asimov's* debut with a funny and fast-paced tale, packed with bizarre new ideas and even stranger characters, that takes us back through time to the Beginning of Everything to explore the mysteries of "Ylem"; veteran author **Tom Purdom** pits cold-eyed Prussian military efficiency and professionalism against an undisciplined but immensely powerful adversary, with wry and surprising results, in the hugely entertaining "Dragon Drill"; hot new writer **Mary Rosenblum,** whose novel *The Drylands* recently won the Compton Crook Award for Best First Novel of the year, takes us to a troubled and impoverished future for a sharp lesson in responsibility and trust, in the poignant story of a "Rat"; and new writer **Wil McCarthy** makes a powerful *Asimov's* debut with a hair-raising study of a man in mortal conflict with "The Blackery Dark." Plus **Robert Silverberg's** "Reflections" column, and an array of other columns and features.

Look for our October issue on sale on your newsstands on August 16, 1994, or subscribe today!

COMING SOON: a big new **Ursula K. Le Guin** novella set in the same universe as *The Left Hand of Darkness,* plus major new stories by **Kate Wilhelm, Joe Haldeman, Maureen F. McHugh, John Brunner, R. Garcia y Robertson, Thomas M. Disch, Pamela Sargent, Neal Barrett, Jr., Charles Sheffield, Connie Willis, Avram Davidson, Robert Reed, James Patrick Kelly, Robert Frazier, Phillip C. Jennings, G. David Nordley,** and many more.

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UNBOUND PLANET

Out where Voyager can't find it
out where hydrogen freezes
call it Prometheus
unbound, plomet perhaps
or formed from missing matter
why shouldn't it be made of chocolate
with a devil's food batter,
and raspberry fondant core?
Its evolution is unlikely, I know,
but consider
once made, nobody would find it and eat it
nor would the inhabitants make war
they would instead be all jolly
from endorphins from caffeine-
like alkaloid.
In the deep dark void,
it would be a brown planet
no danger of brocolli
or any photosynthetics on it.
So sorry we can't locate
this unbound world
which may not even exist
and to which you probably
would not want to go anyway.
So let it spin on in the unfathomed dark
like an enormous Dove bar in the sky
until captured by a big hot sun like ours
at which time it will melt
and splatter the entire solar system
with plometary goo
and chocolate fondue.

—Mary A. Turzillo

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Tony Daniel lives in a '49 Crown Super Coach on Vashon Island. The bus sits at the end of a long path that meanders past some ducks and through a blackberry bramble and a little woods. "When the fog rolls in at night, the place is without stars or moon, and seems completely cut off from the Universe"—much like the setting in . . .

ANGEL OF MERCY

Tony Daniel

1

When I came down to the concrete, she was there, standing barefoot. Her skin scraped against the sidewalk, rasping dryly. There was dirt in the small wrinkles around her ankle, and she had a light tan. The sun was almost behind her, and her face was haloed to a darkness.

She paused, and looked me over. What was there to do with such a mess?

I couldn't speak. My bones felt light and brittle. Several of them were obviously shattered.

There was *nothing* to do with such a mess. She walked away, like the wind over dead leaves.

2

I saw her again one dark night, while I was still healing. I walked along the trail through the vines toward the place I lived. The trail was misty and the stars above were blurs. In front of me, a dark shape moved into the trail. All I could see was a space of nothingness there.

"You're the one who fell," a voice said. It was high, but resonant—sort of like tea with lemon. "I was standing on the sidewalk."

I stopped walking. "How can you see me?" I asked. "I can't see you."

"My eyes have adapted," she said. She started to laugh, then caught her breath in a small gasp. "I didn't think you would *live*. I came to see if it was true."

She moved darkly from the trail, but the vines and brambles did not shake. I went to where she had been, and there was still warm hanging in the air, almost a shape. Somehow, it reminded me of the sound of her voice.

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3

I lived in a cabin, in a small woods near a pond choked with ducks. I did not like the ducks. They reminded me of better times, perhaps, other times—though I couldn't really remember. I ate one, occasionally.

4

She was getting onto a bus one day near winter, when I was in the city to find a book.

"Does this go all the way to Mercy?" It was *her* voice asking the question. There was no mistake.

I ran to the curb, but the bus was pulling away. She carried what I thought was the case for a musical instrument. Her hair was blonde. I saw that her hair was long and blonde, but I still couldn't see her face. I watched her make her way along the central aisle toward the back. She wore a white and black blouse. The musical-instrument case bumped people and they shifted out of the way. The bus pulled away before she sat down. I could not find the book I was hunting for that day, but bought another that looked interesting.

When I was reading the book that night, in my cabin far out of town, I realized that I'd known it was her because of her voice, yes, but mostly because I'd stood on the curb once again in the warm space she'd left behind.

5

I realized in the midst of reading the book I'd bought that I had read it before. Then, after I'd read the book, I started to remember more things. A duck bit me once when I was little. A long time later, exactly a lifetime, my wings broke because they were new, and I didn't know how to fly. I fell a long way.

Now my wings were mended.

6

Some days later, I went back to the city. I went to the corner and waited for the bus. It pulled up.

"Do you go all the way to Mercy?" I asked the bus driver. His hat was

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very large, and his face was hidden in its shadow. His uniform was brown and yellow, with a silver badge.

"Never heard of it," he said. "You can't get to any Mercy from here, even with a transfer."

I tried to get on anyway, but my wings wouldn't fit through the door.

The driver shook his head and laughed good-naturedly from under the enormous hat. He shut the door in my face.

Mercy. She'd definitely said Mercy. I remembered that, too.

7.

As I returned to the cabin that night, the grass crackled with ice along the path through the vines. It was rimed, and scattered moonlight like a thousand spider eyes. I carried a flashlight now, but not to light my way. In case she came again, to see her better.

When I got near the cabin, I could see smoke curling up into the moonlight. I could hear faint music. I took a deep breath of the cold air before I opened the door and went inside.

She was sitting near the fire with her back to me, in my rocking chair. I could see her hands fingering a brightness in front of her, and that was where the music came from. My book lay beside her, on the floor, open.

"I see you've been reading," she said. She stopped rocking. She kept playing the music. It was clear and had a warmth that seemed to come from a long way off, the way old light might sound.

"Yeah," I said. "That and eating ducks. Not much else to do."

I closed the door behind me. Ice flakes fell from my hair and wings. I ran my hand through my hair, and gently flapped my wings to shake them out.

"Do you want to stay here?" she asked.

I took a step toward her. The music stopped.

"Where else could I go?" I took another step.

"I like it here," she said. "But you could go *back*."

"Back?" I remembered well enough. A lonely life, but not without its triumphs and pleasures. The fear of death, which now seemed a kind of joke. "Why?"

"Think of it as a mix-up." In the firelight, her hair was golden against her neck and shoulders. She rocked forward, and I saw the edge of her cheek, rimmed with light from the instrument. Her skin was fair, but a little freckled.

"But it wasn't, was it?"

She was quiet for a long time. I stood where I was. The room was warm, but not hot. Perfectly heated against the winter outside.

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"No," she finally said. "It wasn't a mix-up. You were brought for *me*. But it didn't work."

I unfolded my wings. Fully stretched out, they nearly filled the cabin from side to side.

"So you didn't get to Mercy?"

"No. I just took the bus to the end of the line, out to the mountains. But the passes were closed."

"What did you think?"

She set down the instrument in the fire, and it blazed higher, with a white hot center. She turned, but my eyes were dazzled, and still I couldn't see her face.

"I think Mercy would be a nice place to *visit*."

Her breath was fresh on my cheek. So, after all the years of waiting, here she was. I'd gone to the good place after all.

When we kissed, my wings flapped before I could stop myself. The fire roared, and her instrument sang like a harp in the wind.

8

So now the cabin is where we live. She is just a woman, and I am, for the most part, still just a man. I know this because she is pregnant.

I think this is an experiment that hasn't been tried before.

We are experimenting a lot. With, of course, me always on top. But every day I practice flying, and I frighten the ducks at the lake when I swoop down over them—as if they didn't have enough reason to be frightened of me already.

One of these days, I am going to take her with me.

Once I climbed as high as I could, where the air is thin, and my wings beat nearly empty. Out past the city, there are snowy mountains. And past the mountains there is a place where rivers come together and a green and living light shines. But I can't quite make out what it is in the mountain's shadow.

I told her about that place, and that maybe someday I could take her there, after all. I am getting to be a really strong flyer. She just rocked in my rocker, and strummed a cord of light. I don't know if she cares down deep, one way or the other.

I think she loves me. I love her. I don't know whether we'll get along, or whether we're as happy as we can be. But I don't worry as much as I used to. And if it's a boy, I don't know what we're going to name it. But if it's a girl, we already have a name picked out. Maybe Mercy will come to *us*. I wonder if she will have wings? ●

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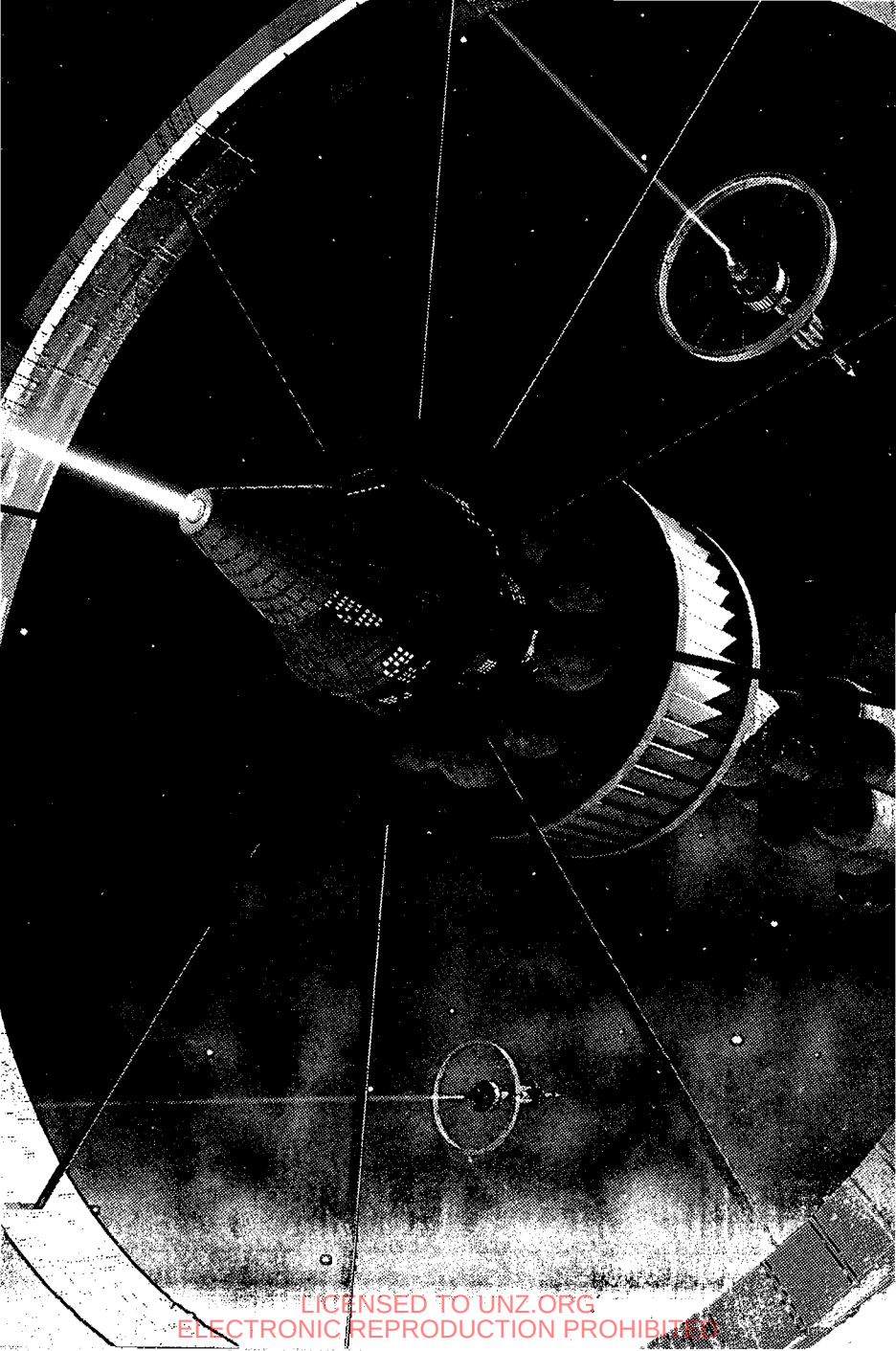

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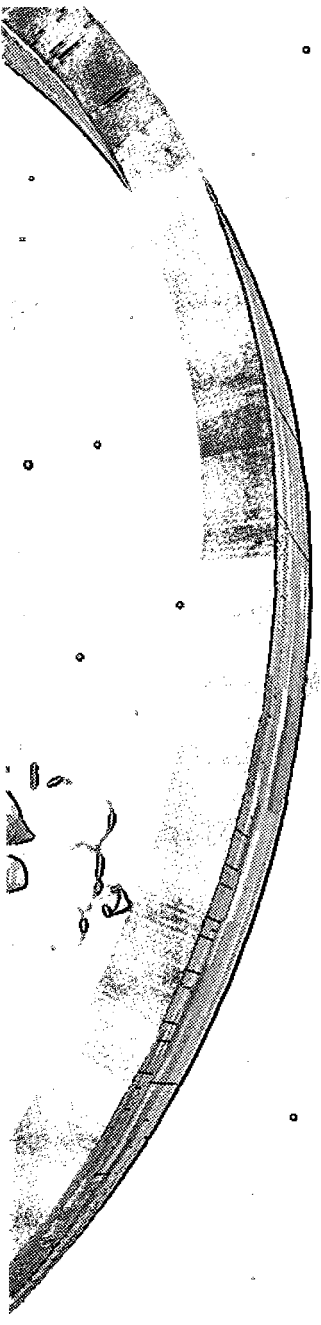

Michael Bishop

CRI DE COEUR

Movie rights to this Nebula-award-winning author's latest book, *Brittle Innings*, have just been purchased by Fox Films. The hardcover edition of this wonderful novel is currently available from Bantam Books. New short stories by Mr. Bishop will soon be appearing in *Full Spectrum 5* and *Heaven Sent*.

Illustration by George H. Krauter

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Why, once, did moths singe the tapestries of their wings in candle flames? Why, once, did the cinder-laden parachutes of fireworks so excite us? And, again, why did certain crazies—fools or saints—sometimes steep themselves in petrol and torch themselves to carbon?

Why, in short, do we long to blaze?

Ever since I turned twelve, I've known. Only a minuscule fraction of the stuff of our universe glows. The rest, the bulk, drifts in darkness, unmoored or rudely tugged. The cold vast black of interstellar night cloaks it from our eyes, our telescopes, our roachlike searchings. We belong to the part that does not glow, to the swallowing dark.

Why wonder, then, that a yearning to leap into the furnace, to god-fashion ourselves in fire, drives us starward on the engines of a mute cri de coeur?

"Whurh we guhn?" Dean asked me.

"It's a surprise. Have a little patience."

"Huvh uhliddle"—he grinned up at Lily—"payshuhns."

Excitedly, I gripped one of roly-poly Dean's hands. Lily Aloisi-Stark, my son's mother, a systems specialist, held the other. Dean swung between us like a baby orangutan, a creature habituated *in utero* to a starship's sterile bays, bioengineered for life aboard a space ark.

Except that he hadn't been. After more than an E-standard century of travel, U.N.S. *Annie Jump Cannon* and the other two great wheelships of our colonizing armada pulsed a mere three years from a rendezvous with the Epsilon Eridani system. The brakes were on.

Along with U.N.S. *Fritz Zwicky* and U.N.S. *Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, Annie* was slowing to keep from overshooting our target, a world where Dean might find himself ill-suited to cope. Of course, I had to admit, that might prove true of all of us.

I led Lily and Dean up a rampway and thumb-keyed the panel of the topmost room in G-Tower of *Annie*'s rotating wheel, a structure so large that the sight of any portion of it always summons my awe.

We entered the observatory. A scaffold supporting the enameled barrel of the ArkBoard Visual Telescope (ABVT) reared over our heads.

We rode an electric lift up through this scaffolding to a carpeted platform with chairs, handrails, and a large shielded viewport. At the platform's other end, two men stood talking at the base of a ladder to the ABVT's sighting mechanisms. One man I knew only as a fuel-systems specialist whose up-phases rarely coincided with mine. The other man, however, was my friend Thich Ngoc Bao, our mission's chief astrophysicist.

Bao sprinted up the ladder. The fuel-systems man turned toward us brushing invisible lint from his tunic. Dean, who had fixed all his attention on Bao and the ABVT's shiny ivory tube, paid him no mind.

"Whurh are we?" Dean said.

"The observatory," Lily said.

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"I go up . . . *thurh!*" Dean pointed at the ABVT.

"No. Sit." I made him sit down in front of the shielded viewport. Dean burrowed into the chair and rolled his head against its cushion, his eyes hungry for new wonders. Clearly, this place excited him.

"Watch," I said.

The shields on the forward viewport retracted, exposing a window into space two meters tall and at least twice that wide. Dean quivered. Gaping, he pulled himself forward, his pudgy legs banging the chair's undercarriage, his pudgy hands bouncing on his knees.

"Holy crow," he said. "Holy crow."

Lily put a hand on his shoulder. "Happy birthday, DeBoy. Many happy returns."

"Whurh iz," straining hard to see, "New Hohm?"

"There." I nodded at the window. "Straight ahead. Among those fuzzy match flames and haloes."

Actually, between *Annie Jump* and the edge of the Epsilon Eridani orrery there now lies an arc of interstellar debris—tumbling chunks of dirt-ice, frozen gas, a chaos of nomadic mongrel rocks—not unlike the Oort Cloud beyond the orbit of Sol's Pluto. Our armada's astronomers, using radio telescopes as well as ABVTs, detected this belt less than five E-years ago. Today, we call it the Barricado Stream. Given the dimensions of this shadowy region, however, Commander Odenwald and his counterparts on *Zwicky* and *Chandrasekhar* foresee no trouble taking even our prodigious arks through its far-flung hazards into the system's heart.

The tech who'd been talking to Bao strolled over and halted in front of Dean. From this new vantage, he stared at Dean. The relentless blankness of his gaze annoyed me so much that I stared pointedly back at him.

"Hello, Mr.—?" I prompted.

"Mikol. Kazimierz Mikol. Children have no place up here."

"Sez who?" Lily said.

"Regs, I'm afraid. Ask Heraclitus." He hitched his thumb at the nearest toadstool unit. "Check for yourself."

Seeing a quick tautening of the cords under Lily's jaw, I said, "Dean's just come off a short ursidormizine nap. He's six. This is his first observatory visit. Why try to squelch his pleasure?"

Mikol shrugged.

"This is his birthday present," Lily said. "Abel wanted to give him—" She stuck.

Mikol superciliously lifted an eyebrow.

"—the stars," Lily finished in some consternation.

"Oh? Is that right? Who's Abel?"

"I am," I said: "Abel Gwiazda. When I was twelve, my adoptive father gave the stars to me for Christmas on my first Mars trip."

Mikol clasped his hands at his waist and smiled. "Ah. The reenactment of a family tableau. How sweet."

Lily and I exchanged a look.

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"Of course, the reg in question has its roots in a wholly legitimate concern for mission efficiency," Mikol said. "In addition—as if it mattered in this case—it means to protect our youngest from the deleterious effects of either cosmic rays or overexcitement, I forget which."

Dean kept gaping at the stars, but I gaped at Mikol. I had never known such rudeness, even under the guise of enforcing shipboard discipline, since coming aboard *Annie Jump Cannon* off Luna in 2062. Reputedly, the U.N.'s planners had selected against egregious social blunderers like Mikol. If so, how had he contrived to get aboard?

Pointing, Dean suddenly cried, "I see . . . New Hohm!"

"No," I said. "New Home's sun, maybe. We're still too far away to make out planets."

"Or even the biggest rocks in the Barricado Stream," Mikol told Dean in a grating adult-to-child voice.

Dean twigged next to nothing of the insult. He grinned at Kazimierz Mikol.

Mikol turned to Lily. "Does the boy like rocks? Take him down to the beach garden in hydroponics."

"Abel's done that already," Lily said. "Dean likes it."

"Likes rocks, does he? Good. Maybe we'll grab one with a Colombo tether while crossing the Barricado."

"Whatever for?" Lily said.

"To abandon him on," Mikol said as a parting shot. He strode to the scaffold lift before Lily or I could blink, much less frame a rejoinder.

Dean, heedless, sat there gnomishly. Starlight, modestly color-shifted from our deceleration, washed over his face like melting diamonds.

I was outraged. I stared after Mikol, thankful only that Lily and I could give our son the stars.

Me? Just as I told Mikol, I am Abel Gwiazda. My adoptive parents came to the United States from Poland in the fourth decade of the twenty-first century. My father, a physicist trained in Krakow, and my mother, the science journalist who broke Poland's so-called "Coca-Cola/Cyclotron" scandal in the late twenties, took positions with the ISCA (International Space & Colonization Authority) in Hutchinson, Kansas. After discovering that they could have no children of their own, they adopted me, a nameless Tanzanian child orphaned in the last of the Drought Riots and smuggled to Puerto Rico by profit-taking babyleggers.

I grew up well-loved, but aimless and deracinated. I spent three years as a teenager in a dome community beneath the great escarpment of Mons Olympica on Mars, learning, more by accident than deliberate application, the agrogeology skills that, upon our joint return to Earth in 2056, I took up formally in Oran, Algeria. With doctorate in hand and recommendations from my well-placed parents, I qualified for, and easily landed a spot in, the Epsilon Eridani Expedition—whose planning, funding, and assembly in lunar orbit occupied the entire world throughout

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the turbulent fifties. You can't go home again, but you can try to make one Elsewhere, and for me the E's in E^3 stand for that very hope.

A part of any home is family. I can't help it: I feel the call of family intensely. So strongly did I feel it before the making of my son Dean that I (respectfully) sought reproductive contracts with a half dozen women in G-Tower—including Etsuko Endo, Nita Sistrunk, and even the menopausal physicist Indira Sescharchari—before Lily Aliosi-Stark, a kindly woman in her late twenties, agreed. Her only stipulation was that I expect and solicit only minimal help from her in raising the child. To raise a child in the habitat tower of an ark, at least one parent must forgo the balm of ursidormizine slumber, submitting to the pitiless depredations of aging to care for, teach, and discipline that child.

"This is what *you* want," Lily said. "I wish to save myself for New Home. I don't want to set foot there feeling achy and antiquated. Understand?"

I did. So Dean is *my* child. I begot the Down's-syndrome boy on Lily during several bouts of fiery lovemaking. Later, in a burst of self- and partner-mocking irony that startled and then tickled me, Lily called our wild sessions a "screwbilee." Aboard *Annie,* I have a reputation for straight-laced stoicism stemming from my Reform Catholicism and the twin concerns of my arkbound work, agrogeology and poetry. The former I do for business (ultimately, the business of survival), the latter for love—just as, looking ahead, I persuaded Lily to conceive a child and then finagled authorization from med services for her to carry it to term.

During our lovemaking, Lily said, "Boy or girl, give it your name. I decline to hang another hyphen around the poor kid's neck."

"Gwiazda-Aliosi-Stark?"

"Absolutely not. Throw in a double first name, Claude-Mark or Julia-Cerise, and it'd go down like a swimmer in a titanium wetsuit."

So, months before giving birth, Lily renounced any claim on handing the child her surname. This fact comforted me. What if she had waited until the photoamnioscan at the end of the first trimester revealed the embryo's trisomy 21? (Which, of course, it did.) At that point, the imperfect fetus would have thrown her motives forever in doubt. I would have wondered if she had deferred to me not solely out of her wish to set aside the demands of parenting, but also out of scorn for our botched offspring.

Masoud Nadeq, the chief physician in G-Tower, showed us the results of the photoamnioscan and listed our options, namely, to abort the pregnancy, to bring it to term with no effort at gene rectification, or to intervene at the chromosomal level with the highly limited procedures available on board. During the past seven E-years, nearly two hundred other children have been born on the *Annie Jump Cannon* alone, and Nadeq's records show that only one other couple—cosmic rays, variable gravity, and the other gene-crippling aspects of near-light-speed travel aside—has conceived a Down's-syndrome infant.

Lily: "What did they do?"

Dr. Nadeq: "They chose to terminate."

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"Is that what you advised?" I asked.

Dr. Nadeq: "For quite good reasons, expedition guidelines strongly advance that option. In cases like yours, however, there's no unappealable directive to terminate."

I said, "To get a directive, our fetus would have to have two heads or no brain. Is that it?"

Dr. Nadeq: "In a manner of speaking."

Lily: "Then our baby is reprieved."

Dr. Nadeq: "Do you agree, Dr. Gwiazda?"

I said, "Of course. Didn't I lobby this woman to help me call our hatchling's pent-up spirit from the dark?"

Dr. Nadeq: "That's . . . very poetic."

"My avocation. Didn't I run our application through every nook and switchback in Heraclitus's cybernetic innards?"

Dr. Nadeq: "Then you accept the role of guardian as well as that of sire?"

Lily: "He does."

"I do," I said.

Dr. Nadeq: "Excellent. Sign off on this waiver."

"What waiver?"

Dr. Nadeq: "Of unadulterated community support—once, that is, your child is born and later when we begin to colonize New Home."

I despised the waiver's threat of premeditated abandonment, but I signed off on it. How could I condemn a society under extreme environmental and psychological duress for declining to accept with open arms a handicapped child? Especially when Lily and I chose to bring him to term in full knowledge of his handicap and his potentially disruptive needs?

Even so, the waiver galled. I signed it with a trembling hand.

Most voyagers treat Dean with kindness. To date, this Kazimierz Mikol bastard comprises a boorish minority of one. Despite recycling and other ingenious reclamation schemes (his reasoning must go), we have finite supplies, and once we make planetfall, anyone with a mental and/or physical handicap will represent an outright drag on the colonization process.

Better that Dean had come stillborn from the womb, Mikol must figure. Better, now, that we recommit him to the darkness through an ejector tube.

I think too much on Mikol's hostility. Most people, as I have said, are kind.

Item: Etsuko Endo, a biologist who passes her up-phase time doing adjustment counseling, recently spent four hours casting sticks of different lengths for Dean and helping him lay them out in educational patterns.

"Rhommm-buhz!" he said when Etsuko brought him back to me. "Daddy, I cuhn make a . . . *rhom-buhz!*" So proud. Even as he made, not

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a rhombus, but a triangle whose unequal sides did not quite touch one another.

Item: Commander Odenwald visited Lily only two hours after Dean was born. Repeatedly since that visit, he has used small portions of his long up-phases (despite enzyme cocktails and downtime cell repairs, his hair has turned cayenne-and-silver) to watch Dean trip-sleep or to guide him around the various facilities in G-Tower. In fact, had I not begged him to leave the observatory to Lily and me, Odenwald would have long ago showed that to Dean, too. I believe, then, that with a simple request I can have Mikol dressed down, if not sent packing to his biorack.

Why bother? If Dean had understood any part of Mikol's insult in the observatory, or read the least shade of disdain in his face, I would do it. But Dean thinks everyone loves him. In a universe of swallowing dark, and despite the eclipse of his reason at conception, he scatters a property so similar to light that it dims my vision.

Until, less than a decade ago, a few of us began to have children, you could seldom find more than twenty people awake at any one time in any single living tower on the ever-clocking wheels of our ships. Ten percent of the expedition's personnel oversaw the armada's running, tracked the stars, maintained ship-to-ship communications, studied their specialties like workaholic monks, and ministered to the quasi-corpses stacked in each ark's bioracks.

Only a few days into these up-phases, loneliness settled. An ineffable strangeness pervaded *Annie*'s labs and corridors, as if a winged fairy tripping along at light-speed had cast a spell over my sleeping arkmates, a dark enchantment over every workroom, crawlspace, and maintenance deck. I could hear this implacable sorcery in the hydrogen hiss of the stars; in the white noise of generators, computer-cooling fans, and hidden air recirculators.

I came aboard U.N.S. *Annie Jump Cannon* as a hotshot Ph.D. of twenty-two. So far, this voyage to Epsilon E has taken a little over 109 standard years—relative, that is, to the arks in our fleet. Had I left an infant child with my parents in Algeria, it would have long since doddered into codgerhood—if it remained alive at all.

As for me, given the periodic metabolic respite of U-sleep, I have aged (Dr. Nadeq tells me) the physiological equivalent of only thirteen years. In short, I am a thirty-five-year-old centenarian. But no one stays up-phase much longer than a month each shipboard year (other than Commanders Odenwald, Roosenno, and Joplin, and a few engineering troubleshooters and continuity personnel), so that, among us would-be colonists, youthful centenarians—of many different ages—register as commonplaces, not freaks.

Of course, in this final decade of our approach to Epsilon Eridani, an expedition policy authorizing the conception, *in utero* gestation, and natural birth of children took effect for screened personnel young enough to carry out their parental obligations on New Home. Six years after Lily

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and I made Dean, this policy lapsed because "children under four will impact negatively on the efficient settlement of the target world that we have hopefully denominated New Home."

Then why permit the arrival of any children at all? Or, at least, the arrival of any offspring under the able-bodied age of, say, sixteen?

Well, the original U.N. planners believed that "in the long term, a generation of colonists reared on the target world's surface from mid-childhood, adapting daily to that world, will prove of incalculable benefit to the planting of a permanent human base in an alien solar system." Nobody, of course, had factored Dean into this reckoning.

In any case, with the advent of children, the living towers on our three wheelships seem less like mausoleums and more like chatter-filled atria or aviaries. I have stayed continuously up-phase ever since Dean's birth (Lily, by contrast, opted for ursidormizine slumber soon afterward and comes up-phase only on his birthday). Although Dean takes closely monitored "naps"—to foster cell growth, to husband our various dry-good stores, and to ease the burden on our recirculating systems—I have no desire to down-phase just to match my sleep periods to his. I sleep when I need to, without drugs, and plot ways to sample, test, and seed the unearthly (conjectural) loams, marls, and humuses of New Home.

At other times, of course, I work in G-Tower's polyped, where Dean has become a cherished favorite of his playmates; a mascot, almost. His blockish head, flat nose, spongy tongue, and stubby hands endear him to, rather than estrange him from, the group. The curiosity and altruism of well-loved children has a weird dynamic. It astonishes and uplifts. It soothes. So how can I regret the nearly six extra years that I've aged as a result of going up-phase for Dean?

Simple: I can't.

Meanwhile, the metaphoric seedpods of *Annie*'s towers have begun to rattle and split. Our corridors ring. The children dance, wonder, explore, scuffle, and sing. Kazimierz Mikol, I feel sure, has taken both a powder and a double dose of refined and amplified bear's blood: ursidormizine.

Our G-Tower mess is draped festively about with acetane banners. Through it drifted a smell like fried ozone and the piped-in strains of an old song called, if repetition of a single phrase means anything, "I'm So Dizzy."

Thich Ngoc Bao, the astrophotographer Nita Sistrunk, and I sat at a table over our trays. Dean huddled in an obsolescent VidPed near the door, spinning the control ball with his palm. (He won't use virch goggles; their simulated environments cut him off too thoroughly from me, and that scares him.) Hiller Nevels, a pilot and maintenance tech, swaggered over from the autodispenser to join us.

". . . detected Eppie's heliopause," Bao was saying. "So we *will* in fact rendezvous with the system."

"You doubted we would?" Nita said.

"Eppie's heliopause?" Hiller said. "What's that?"

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"Did *you* never doubt, Nita?" Bao took a bite out of his steaming oystershell pasta and its garlic-spinach filling. He swallowed. "One downphase, I had a six-month-long nightmare, complete with sound and motion effects. *Annie* dropped like a stale doughnut into a Kerr singularity and whirled around its glowing mouth for about twelve eternities. Frame-dragging, you know. I mummified in my biorack. So did everybody else."

"Cheerful talk," Hiller said.

"Eppie's heliopause is the very edge of the Epsilon Eridani system," Nita told Hiller. "Where the star's solar wind hits the charged particles in interstellar vacuum."

"Isn't the Barricado Stream the edge?" Hiller said.

A star's energy influence, Bao explained, extends well beyond its farthest planet or cometary cloud. Low-frequency radio emissions can undulate a dozen billion miles into the obsidian emptiness surrounding a star.

As Bao spoke, I watched Dean swaying in the VidPed, slapping the control ball. I could see his virtual self—a chunky two-dimensional figure with a feathered spear—stalking a herd of electronic ostriches on a veldt whose real-world equivalent long ago turned into tourist hotels, tennis courts, and golf courses.

Dean didn't care about that. The control ball was easy to spin; the figures on the screen made him laugh. His chuckle, along with the way his head lurched gleefully, warmed my heart, almost as if Lily had rubbed my chest with some sort of thermotherapeutic cream.

Without alerting the others, I picked a comppad off my tunic's carrypatch and began to punch out some verses. I struggled, recasting each stanza three or four times before moving on. During this effort, *Annie* and my friends ceased to exist for me.

In the end, I had my entire effort almost, if not quite, the way I wanted it:

A starchild in a VidPed cage
Unwraps himself, with deadpan glee.
Such fragile tissues disengage,
Such guileless beauty in debris.

Bafflingly, he molts and fledges,
Unwrapping in order to dress.
By this divestment, he pledges
To put on a scarecrow success.

Never has he touched a bird:
A maypop, an eggling, a flame.
In the beginning cracked a word,
The broken promise of his name.

I hear lark song where my fellows

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Discern but babble, vocal cheats.
Take away your amped-up cellos,
Leave me only DeBoy's bleats.

With no ulterior intent,
He cocks and grins at every sign:
Litmus test or test-tube infant,
Telescope or Colombo twine.

So watch his palm atop the ball,
A misfit's flesh on spinning chrome:
Just now a shade on spectral veldt,
But next my son on our New Home.

I looked up to find my friends eyeing me with amusement. How long had I occupied myself writing my poem? Even Hiller, the last of us to sit down, had polished off his meal and was staring at my comppad.

"Another poem?" Bao said. "Well, you have to let us see it. If it's bad manners to tell secrets in front of one's dinner companions, concealing a poem composed at table is also rude. Surely."

"The rudeness is writing it in front of us," Nita said. "He might as well've sat here picking his nose."

Hiller guffawed. "That depends on the poem. Or the nose."

Bao reached across the table. "Give."

I handed him the comppad. I had no qualms about showing around the product of my creative withdrawal. Keats need not fear even a partial eclipse of his immortality, but no other soul this far from home—with the self-proclaimed exception of the Pakistani sferics specialist Ghulam Sharif on U.N.S. *Fritz Zwicky*—can rival my versifying prowess. Other expedition members may scribble confessional, or hortatory, or occasional poems (if you look, you can find the results of their activity on toadstool units everywhere about), but I (humorously) regard my challengers as amateurs or hacks.

"Prepare to fall at my feet in veneration."

"Cripes," said Nita. "Self-praise is no praise at all."

"I unequivocally agree, Ms. Sistrunk," I said.

"You do?"

"Sure. But *no praise* is also no praise at all. I blow my own horn to add a little dressing to the silence."

Bao began to scroll the comppad. He read each stanza aloud for the others. He did so with a pitch of feeling that humbled me: I could *hear* the hiccups in my poem's flow, the off-speed diction, the bungled metrics—hiccups for which Bao's sensitive reading almost compensated.

"What's an eggling?" Hiller asked.

"A little egg," Nita ventured. "What else?"

I said, "I don't know. Something hard like a stone, dense like a black hole, and life-packed, potentially, like an ovum. See? Eggling."

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"What does it mean?" Hiller asked. "Not just eggling, the whole poem?"

"That he loves his son," Bao said. "And looks forward to raising him to manhood on a brave new world."

I could add nothing to that, and when Bao gave me back my comppad, Nita began talking about heliopause again, the savory immenence of planetfall.

Our fleet pulses onward, skimming at a modest moiety of light-speed the interpenetrating membranes of space-time. The Barricado Stream—inside the hard-to-mark heliopause, outside the orbit of a planetary iceball—rushes nearer.

Toward the end of the twentieth century, perturbations in Epsilon Eridani's motion revealed that it most likely dragged planets, if not a gravity sink, around it. Observations made from the Infrared Lunar Astronomical Telescope (IRLAT) on Darkside in the 2030s, along with the fact that Eppie emits an infrared signal hinting at protoplanetary debris, led scientists to posit that the system had five planets, including one in Eppie's zone of habitability, and possibly an outer dust band. We sent out an unmanned probe to confirm these hypotheses, but our armada—dispatched nearly thirty years later, when Ju Tong technology, multinational money, and worsening environmental/social conditions converged to make the launch seem practical if not imperative—has long since outrun the U.N. probe.

Fortunately, shipboard telescopes and Thich Ngoc Bao's relativistic calculus have validated the presence of these worlds. Even more convincingly, so has a probe that we dropped over the side of *Zwicky* before commencing deceleration; as our arks slowed, this probe kept going, making a full-speed transit of the system and thereby detecting the cometary matter in the Barricado Stream by radar echoes.

In any case, New Home does exist, along with a fiery inner planet that a wag among us tagged Red Hot. Three outer planets received equally silly names: Jelly Belly, Jawbreaker, and Cold Cock. Moreover, spectroanalysis carried out on *Chandrasekhar* indicates that New Home has water.

A couple of days ago, because Dean requires extra work and attention if I wish him to reach his full potential, I took him into the geology bay under *Annie*'s observatory deck. I planned not only to do some elementary professional review but also to show him a grabbag of tray specimens: a quartz crystal, a piece of obsidian, a leaf of limestone, a fossil imprint, a geode. Estsuko Endo, after all, has too much to do to spend her every waking moment amusing Dean or devising therapeutic games to educate him.

I don't. My real work begins when our advance scientific teams set down on Epsilon Eridani II (even the hackneyed New Home seems a better name than that) to map, explore, sample, test, and catalogue. Besides, I'm Dean's father: I insisted that this expedition permit him to be.

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Dean handled each specimen with clumsy delight. Except for the collection's lone geode, the specimens are small to the point of parody. In fact, many soil and mineral types exist on *Annie* only as wafer-thin cross-sections on glass slides for microsope viewing.

I half feared that Dean would slice himself on the crystal. (His fingers have the nimbleness of porcelain.) Or would drop the trilobite fragilely preserved in Ordovician clay. Or would lose the stalagmite tip that rested on his single-creased palm like a Lilliputian dagger.

But, chortling, goggle-eyed, Dean managed to hold on to, examine, and return to me every item. He was as respectful of them as, on his sixth birthday, he'd been of the glittery stars in the observatory's viewport.

"Whuh's thiz?"

"Schist."

"Durdy word?"

"No. *Schist.* A flaky, stress-formed rock. Be careful, you'll peel away a mica layer."

"Sch-schid?"

I started to say, "No, *schist,*" when I heard a man behind us laughing, just inside the bay's entrance. I looked over my shoulder to see (for the first time since Dean's visit to the observatory) Kazimierz Mikol.

My gut clenched, a spasm of *déjà vu.* What was Mikol doing in a work-and-study laboratory authorized for, if not expressly limited to, *Annie*'s geology contingent? Would he argue that my six-year-old retardate had no business here? No business, for that matter, anywhere?

"He *does* like rocks, doesn't he?" Mikol said.

That remark instantly soured the look I turned on him. "My sweet Jesus," I murmured.

"You mistake me for someone else," Mikol said. "Look. I came up here at Ms. Endo's request. She wanted me to tell a man in here—identity then unknown to me—that his son—ditto—would have a therapy session with her tomorrow at ten-hundred hours."

"Why didn't she intercom?"

"A whole tribe of ankle biters had her occupied. Besides, your sanctorum was on my way. I need to eyeball the harp strings sweeping down from the arc opposite G-Tower. That all right with you?"

Harp strings meant fuel spokes. I stared hard at Mikol.

"Consider yourself duly messaged, Dr.—?"

"Gwiazda."

"As you like." He pivoted on his heel.

"Wade," Dean said. He meant *wait,* and Mikol turned back to face him.

Dean held up the geode in our collection. He tilted this queer, split rock so that Mikol had to look directly into its crystal-laced cavity. Its hollow glittered like an in-fallen spiderweb in a splash of sunlight, and Mikol stared into it as if hypnotized.

"Spokes," Dean said. "Fyool spokes."

Those words seemed to stun Mikol. He looked from the reflective cavity

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of the geode to the dull, flat face of the boy that Lily and I, in his view, had selfishly inflicted on the limited resources of our ark.

"He means the crystals," I said. "They must remind him of the spokes to our matter-antimatter rocket."

"I *know* what he meant."

"He saw those spokes only once," I insisted. "The same day Lily and I gave him the stars."

"There's a mobile of the *Annie* in the polyped. He's seen that dozens of times, surely."

"Its spokes don't glow like the real ones. In the glare of the exhaust stream, the real ones are . . . magical."

"That doesn't make his *equating* the two a wonderwork."

Mikol refused to look away from me. And, out of atavistic machismo or scientific curiosity, I refused to look away from him. "But he's just linked you, a fuel-systems specialist, to the 'spokes' in the geode."

"He has ears. He heard me say fuel spokes. So he has a bare-assed modicum of motherwit. Hallelujah."

"What about the associative leap he just made? Not, by the way, from your words to you, but from the geode's crystals to *Annie*'s weblike fuel lines?"

Dean kept pointing the geode. The way he was gripping it, it reminded me of some sort of exotic weapon. I imagined a burst of energy flashing from it and splitting Mikol's chest cavity open, to reveal . . . what? The gemlike perdurability of his heart? The flowing rubies of his blood? The hard-edged latticework of his myocardia?

"Do you think that on that basis I should declare the kid a genius?" he asked me.

"Human would do. Just human."

"Tiglathpileser was human, it's rumored. And Caligula. So were a whole host of twentieth-century tyrants. So presumably were the brain-dead idiots who turned the Earth into a treeless detention camp. Being human, I'm afraid, doesn't automatically confer demigod status on anyone."

"Human beings made these arks."

"Praise Noah for that irrefutable insight! Which onboard system did your genius offspring invent?"

This retort shut my mouth; it also had a spirit-dampening effect on Dean. He lowered the geode and and made a queer, gargling moan in his throat.

No longer in the geode's sights, Mikol backed out of the workroom. I followed him.

In the corridor, Mikol pointed a finger at me to hold me at bay. "Two run-ins with Gwiazda and his hairless baboon," he said. "Well, this second run-in was a lot less amusing than the first. A third meeting may result in the total overthrow of my antihostility training, the blanket neutralization of my daily serenotil boosters."

"What's the matter with you, anyway?"

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"Nothing. I dislike mongoloids. In my view, an entirely rational prejudice."

"You've overstepped yourself there," I said.

"Well, so what? I'll go down-phase again after solving my hydrogen-flow problem. And stay zonked until *Annie* enters the Barricado Stream. With any luck, I won't collide with Gwiazda and Son ever again, either aboard this ark or down on New Home, where I plan to homestead a small farm off limits to fat little mongoloids and their selfish Sambo daddies."

"You bastard," I said.

"Check out the little bastard in your lab," Mikol replied. "More than likely, he's accidentally swallowed a rock."

Once again, he strode away before I could seize his arm or mount a reply. Under my breath, though, I murmured, "Honky," not knowing where the word had come from; even so, it seemed a crass betrayal of the Gwiazdas, who, in innocence and love, had bought my life and raised me.

"Whurh's Lily?" Dean asked.

"You know as well as I. Asleep. She's always asleep. It's her calling."

"I wand to see her."

"Uh-uh. You only think you do. We've done this before, Dean. The damned bioracks spook you."

"I *want* to see her," Dean said, struggling to enunciate.

"No you don't."

"Yez. Yez I do. Take me to see her."

Dean and I had long since retired to our mezzanine-level quarters. The hour was nearly midnight (as if you could not legitimately say the same of any hour of our arkboard journey), and I wanted Dean to go as soundly asleep as his mother. But an afternoon birthday party in the polyped, and then an evening of restored and colorized *Our Gang* comedies over our link to Heraclitus's vidfiles, had left him wrought up and obstinate. I could tell that an all-out battle now would snap my brittle self-control faster than would appeasement, even with a visit to the bioracks thrown in as Dean's unwarranted spoils.

(Spoils. Evocative word.)

Actually, Dean seldom tries to stand his ground against me or anyone else. Agreeableness and conciliation define him the way stealth and curiosity define a cat. Better for harmony's sake, I rationalized, to indulge him tonight in this unusual display of resoluteness than to shatter my peace of mind—what peace of mind?—by playing the tyrant.

Ten minutes after midnight, then, we dropped to the lowest level in G-Tower, a fluorescent dungeon of computer monitors and foam-lined ursidormizine pods, and asked the security tech Greta Agostos to pass us through the barred entrance of *Annie*'s hibernaculum.

"On what business?" Greta asked.

"Guess. Dean wants to see his mother."

Greta rubbed her knuckles furiously—but not hard—over Dean's head.

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"She won't be very talkative, DeBoy. And you and your dad will have to submit to a search. You know, a ticklish patting down."

"The only reason I came," I said.

But that "patting down" remark was a standard security-tech joke. In fact, without even touching us, Greta ran an aural fod—*f*oreign-*o*bject *d*etector—around our entire bodies with the impersonal deftness the very opposite of sensual. Her fod, by the way, absolved us of trying to smuggle into the hibernaculum any sort of weapon, drug, or softdrink IV-drip.

The security bars retracted upward, and Dean and I passed into the eerie twilight mausoleum of the bioracks. The air in this circular hibernaculum has a wintry blue tinge and a biting regulated chill. You can identify our quasi-corpses, by the way, either by reading their nameplates or by looking through the pods' frost-traced visors.

We walked the hibernaculum's perimeter—tap-tap-tapping on its naked metal floor—until we had reached the biorack of Lily Aliosi-Stark. Her pod rests on the chamber's third strata, not quite two meters up, and I always have to lift Dean so that he can gaze through the rime-crazed faceplate at his mother's pale but lovely profile.

"Sleebin beaudy," Dean whispered, full of awe. "My mama's jes like sleebin beaudy."

"I'd wake her with a kiss, DeBoy, but my lips always freeze to the visor."

"Funny."

"Not if it happens to you. All right if we go home now?"

Dean put his fingertips to Lily's faceplate. He chuckled when they didn't stick to it. Instead, they left milky prints, which faded slowly once he'd drawn his hand away.

"Pood me down."

I put Dean down. He ambled along the bottom two strata of bioracks, back toward the hibernaculum's entrance, until he came to an empty pod featuring this legend on its nameplate: *Abel Walter Gwiazda.* Dean rubbed the letters of our surname with a stubby forefinger. Then, as I had feared—as I'd *known* would happen—Dean gulped raspingly at the chilly air and went as pop-eyed as a strangler's victim. Why had I supposed that this visit would turn out better than all the others?

"Gone," Dean said. "Holy crow, daddy's gone."

"I'm right here, son. Unlike your ever-drowsing mama, you can't expect me to be two places at once."

On the verge of blubbering, Dean repeated, "Gone," at least a dozen times and then began to wail: a fractured banshee keen that filled this weird crypt for the living like a squadron of angry wasps.

I clutched my shoulders, then covered my ears, then grabbed my shoulders again. Dean's wail stung and restung the snarled thread-ends of my untangling nerves.

"Damn you, you little defective! Shut up!"

Dean's eyes dilated to their utmost. He stopped wailing and retreated. Repeatedly, I shoved him in the chest with my knuckles, herding him

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toward the mausoleum's exit. On my fifth or sixth such shove, Dean stumbled and collapsed sliding on his bottom. I immediately yanked him up.

"The one place you can't endure for three minutes straight is the one place you insist on coming! Why? You don't have a half-wit's glimmering, do you?"

Greta appeared at Dean's back out of the cold indigo fog. She knelt and hugged him from behind. He, in turn, spun about and clung to her as if to the winged savior in a fairy tale unwinding on a private channel in his head. The sight of his fear—the realization of it—staggered me.

"You asked Lily for this, Abel," Greta said. "You asked for just what's got you so hugely browned off tonight."

"I, I didn't know," I managed. "Not really."

"I'm taking Dean out front with me. He'll be okay. Go to Lily. Talk to her. Stay for as long as it takes."

Greta picked up Dean and carried him, totally compliant in her arms, around the hibernaculum's circular walk. As I stood there in the shame of Greta's rebuke, the two of them receded into the thickening blue fog.

I returned to Lily's biorack. Our conversation touched on many things, including the essential loneliness of starfaring. Later, back at the U-dorm's entrance, Dean greeted me as if I had never derided his mother or cravenly abused him—as if, in short, I *deserved* his regard.

Each of our ships carries around sixteen hundred people, two hundred to a habitation tower. Most travel down-phase in banks of computer-monitored bioracks. Over the last few years of our approach, however, with a deliberate effort to bring children into our spacefaring community, we've increased our numbers by almost twenty young persons a tower. I assume that *Zwicky* and *Chandresekhar* boast comparable population surges, but I've made no real effort to stay abreast of their figures. Dean claims most of my time.

After my ugly flare-up in the hibernaculum, I determined to teach Dean everything I could about our ship, our fleet, our aims, our mystical hopes. He now understands that hydrogen flows from the fuel tanks on *Annie*'s thirty-mile-long wheel to the stores of antihydrogen ice in the rocket dragging us along behind it like a colossal, fixed, empty-bottomed parachute. He knows that once we reach New Home, we will have exhausted every scintilla of fuel available to us, and he also understands, I believe, that to return to Earth or to go on to another solar system (Tau Ceti, say, or Sirius) will require the processing and loading of a volume of hydrogen and antihydrogen ice equal to that with which we left the Moon. He knows. . . .

But I delude myself: Dean has profound physical and mental handicaps; and love, the ultimate paternal blessing and folly, has limited power to add to his brain cells or to pack those he has with liberating knowledge.

In the polyped portion of the G-Tower nursery, Dean and I sat behind

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a partition draped with a banner depicting the galactic cluster including our own Milky Way. I thumb-moused a gyroscopically interphased replica of *Annie Jump Cannon,* hung above us as a mobile, through a dozen different maneuvers. In its nearly invisible filament harness, the tiny ark canted, wheeled, and strained.

Dean was weary of the drills and demonstrations, enduring them out of a puppy-dog loyalty. In fact, I felt that somewhere along the trajectory of this lesson, our roles—of father and son; of mentor and student—had reversed.

"Howfurh?" Dean said.

"What?"

"How furh to New Hohm?"

"I don't know. We're still braking. Commander Odenwald probably has it computed to the nanosecond."

Etsuko came in and sat down opposite Dean in a kiddie chair almost too small even for her. "No matter when we get into orbit around New Home," she told Dean, "you'll probably be at least eight or nine before you visit the planet."

Dean visibly perked—not at Etsuko's words, but at her presence. "Why?" he asked.

"We'll have a lot to do before we let any of you children risk the surface. Surveillance, photography, mapping, testing, a great many things. Understand?"

"Are thurh guhna be monstuhrs?"

"Monsters?"

The wedge of Dean's tongue hung between his lips. Then he said, *"Dyne-o-sours,"* as if the word embodied a vinegary type of lizardly force.

"I doubt that," Etsuko said.

"Then whud? Peepul?"

"I doubt that too."

"And if there were people, intelligent beings, they'd look upon *us* as the monsters," I said. "Invaders from outer space, their worst fork-legged nightmares."

Dean's face clouded. His tongue filled his mouth like a gag.

"Abel, you've scared him."

"No great task." I usually avoid sarcasm—my son has no feel for it—but I hadn't slept for over fifty hours (not even a catnap), and Dean's intractable innocence had worn some holes in my thick-skinned cheerfulness. "But suppose, Etsuko, that we do drop down to New Home and find ourselves confronted by a species of gentle sapients."

"Suppose we do?"

I told her how the aboriginal sapients of New Home would inevitably view us as a scourge. Later, I wrote,

down
we
fall

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deformed invaders
dropping into their midst

so that
at our coming
they reel back
feeling
blitzed
appalled
prey to misshapen raiders

noting
our beaklike snouts
our eyes of shiny goo
the rows of gleaming bones
behind our pouts
the way our fingers
sprout like vermicelli
with half-moon lyre picks
twanging
in their knuckled heads

and they know
their hot-pink sods
glass-sheathed trees
spiraling geyser creeks
and dog-masked gods
crunching fire opals
on the waves of cliffs
a destiny made manifest
by a pale of stars

will fall forever
to the uprights—
who but us—
swarming down from
who knows where
who knows why
and couldn't they
just die

we hope so
oh we hope so
don't we
ms. etsuko

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Still later, Dean occupied elsewhere, I showed this effort to Etsuko. She read my last little quatrain as an insult.

Without benefit of ursidormizine, I dream of New Home and its dominant species: humanoid creatures unaware that invaders from outer space are eyeing their world. A landing in the capital of their foremost nation-state allows the first U.N. party down (oddly, it includes both me and Kazimierz Mikol) to see that every individual of this species roughly resembles my handicapped son.

"I know what we ought to call this place," Mikol tells me: "Special Olympica."

In a collective journey of a century or more, you cannot expect to reach your destination without losing someone, even if the majority of your expeditionary force spends most of its time in monitored trip-sleep. Seven of *Annie Jump*'s original contingent of sixteen hundred have died in transit, the latest (but one) a woman in A-Tower who failed to survive childbirth, although, blessedly, her infant daughter did not die and still lives in the A-Tower nursery.

Arkboard funerals last only minutes; few among us attend them. Each tower has a chaplain well-versed in the rituals of different faiths, those of mainline world religions as well as those of small local cults. If the deceased ascribed to a particular belief system and left unambiguous instructions, the chaplain observes them during the memorial service and the subsequent ejection of the corpse from the ship. (For reasons that should be self-evident, our regs permit neither cremation nor entombment.)

Granted, most of those who have died, both here and on our sibling arks, have professed a generic sort of agnosticism or a science-centered, mystical atheism (no matter how oxymoronish this last term may sound), but one man aboard *Chandrasekhar* asked for and received a voodoo funeral, complete with chants and sprinklings of (symbolic) rooster's blood. According to associates, he believed that one day, far in this expansion/contraction cycle of our cosmos, another starfaring ship would retrieve his mummified corpse. Technospiritually revived, he would walk its decks as the undead prophet of the universe's next systalic blossoming.

In my view, the shame of this bravura credo resides not in its superstition, but in the fact that only four of this man's arkmates attended his obsequies. Of course, those who sleep cannot send off the sleeper.

The point of this digression? Several weeks after taking Dean to visit his sleeping mother, a woman by the name of Helena Brodkorb, a floral geneticist in D-Tower, died in her biorack. Despite a complex fail-safe system, her monitors had not alerted her tower's med-unit personnel of her measurable physical deterioration under ursidormizine. By the time anyone noticed, she had slipped away.

A small scandal ensued. Odenwald suspended two up-phase med techs

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and ordered an investigation. He did not intend to have one more sleeper under his command die in a malfunctioning biorack.

This death would have meant little to me, and nothing to Dean, if, a few hours later, I had not learned that Helena Brodkorb was—or had been—Kazimierz Mikol's aunt, an aunt two years younger than he. Further, Ms. Brodkorb had no other kin on *Annie* or our sibling arks. (Effecting a passenger exchange between two huge wheelships moving at point-ten *c* is a doable but risky venture.) Excepting spouses and the children born during our decade-long approach to Epsilon Eridani, few people in our expedition have relatives aboard our arks. Therefore, Odenwald felt that Mikol, down-phase again in G-Tower, should know that Ms. Brodkorb had died, even if—maybe *especially* if—it reflected badly on arkboard fail-safe systems. Mikol might elect to attend her last rites.

Quickly, then, Mikol was up-phased, and Odenwald personally broke the news of his aunt's demise.

Mikol, groggy from both the ursidormizine and its sudden neutralization, began to weep. (I have this fact from the med techs who revived him.) He had loved Helena Brodkorb. The disorientation common to the newly awakened may have influenced him, but, still, Mikol's tears had a strong emotional, not just a narrow physiological, wellspring.

I had difficulty crediting this report, of course, but it cheered rather than surprised me. I wanted to believe it—not that a smart and productive woman had died, but that Mikol had reacted to her passing less like an automaton programmed for cynical efficiency than like . . . well, someone's warm-blooded nephew.

I have reconstructed Kazimierz Mikol's activities on the day before Helena Brodkorb's memorial service from an account he gave me later. The most surprising things about this turn of events, of course, are that he deliberately sought Dean and me out in a spirit of reconciliation and that he and I did in fact reach a wary accord.

On that morning, then, Mikol dressed in paper coveralls and a pair of plastic slippers. He added a disposable dove-gray tunic. Every item in his make-do wardrobe emitted a soft gray incandescence. Dove gray. Mourning-dove gray. The colors of civilized dolor, gentlemanly grief.

The chaplain in D-Tower had scheduled Helena's funeral for 0900 hours the next day—after a noninvasive autopsy and med-tech analysis. Mikol had received assurances that he would be unable to tell that anyone, or anything, had so much as pinched Helena's eyelid back or calipered her elbow. He would find her lying serenely in state on the retractable lingula, or tongue, of a waste-disposal ejector.

Tomorrow.

In the meantime, Mikol had a small mission to carry out. He tried to recall what amusements—games, toys, icons—young boys found amusing, and which still pleased *him,* as an adult. No rocks, though. No fake beaches in hydroponics. No shiny precious or semiprecious stones. No

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geode. Nothing, in fact, pertaining to geology, the professional realm of Dean Gwiazda's father.

Mikol thought a long time. Then he took a lift from the transphase lounge to the mezzanine-level cubbyhole of a pilot and maintenance tech. This, not altogether coincidentally, was a pack rat named Hiller Nevels. Hiller gave him the items he wanted as a kind of consolation gift.

Gift in hand, Mikol rode back down and crossed the G-Tower atrium, a lofty cylinder housing vitrofoam benches, a vegetable garden, exotic ferns, parrot-colored orchids and bromeliads, and a regulated population of purple finches. Heedless of its plants and birds, Mikol hiked through this pocket wilderness to the catwalk outside the polyped.

He found Dean and me playing a game of cards (Go Fish, if I remember correctly) at a toadstool unit well removed from the other children. I greeted him with a look betraying my outrage and suspicion:

"Yes?"

"I came"—Mikol told me later that he could feel his words scratching his throat like a rusty sword blade—"I came to make peace."

"Why?" I said.

"You need a reason?"

"If I'm not to regard this as a shabby trick, yes."

"Such generosity of spirit."

The cards on Dean's screen fanned out before him like so many canceled tickets, and he gave Mikol a toothy, distracted smile.

"Dr. Gwiazda, the truth is, I've undergone a—"

"A change of heart?"

"Perhaps."

"Because your aunt has just died?"

"Word certainly travels."

"Yes, it does. At a healthy fraction of light-speed."

Dean pushed away from his toadstool console. *"Hullo!"* he cried. *"Mistuh Mickle!"*

Mikol knelt beside Dean and pulled a small, foam-lined carrypress from his pocket. After thumbnailing its lid open, he held it on his palm so Dean could see the faceted seeds inside it. They looked like four pieces of sparkly gravel. This was a coincidence of appearances, though, not a surrender to the insult theme—*rocks in the head, out on a rock*—that had so far typified his run-ins with Dean and me.

"Whud . . . whud are they?"

"Eye-eyes," Mikol said. "Impact inflatables."

"They're so . . . liddle."

"The better to bring aboard a vessel where closet space is tight. Touch one."

"No!" I said. "Mr. Mikol, those things are illegal aboard *Annie.*"

"Not so," Mikol said from his crouch. "Would I endanger our ship? Or hooliganize your son? You see, *these* eye-eyes will fall back to portable grit as quickly as they burst to their full dimensions—the latest in amusement engineering just before our launch."

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Dean held a finger over the carrypress: expectant, unsure, ready for direction. His psychic investment in electronic Go Fish had long since bottomed out.

"No," I told him.

"Ease off, Dr. Gwiazda," Mikol said. "I'm trying to make amends, not get the boy bioracked for reckless mischief."

Although still skeptical, I thought this over and nodded at Dean. "Go on, then. Take one. Just one."

Dean's hand trembled over the carrypress. Mikol seized it and guided his forefinger to one of the eye-eyes. Sweat and surface tension lifted the eye-eye clear. Dean stared at the grit on his fingertip in what looked to me like goggle-eyed dumbfoundment.

"Roll it between your thumb and forefinger," Mikol said. "Then throw it against the floor or the wall." He stepped aside to give Dean room.

Dean flicked the eye-eye feebly past my head. It struck the polyped's deck, skittered to a standstill, and began to emit a faint, melodious hiss.

When Mikol picked it up, it quieted. "More *oomph!*" he advised. "Try again." He gave the eye-eye back to Dean, who looked to me for guidance.

"Go ahead. Hurl it. Hard."

Dean obeyed, tossing the eye-eye with such an awkward shoulder snap that I could imagine him whining for weeks about the lingering soreness. A hard expulsion of breath through his nostrils sounded a lot like a squeal.

But the eye-eye hit the wall behind me and impact-inflated on the rebound.

Wham! Revolving in the polyped was a fabriloon replica of an Allosaurus as large as Kazimierz Mikol himself. It hissed as it tumbled, that crimson and turquoise effigy of a giant lizard, and hissed more loudly than the eye-eye from which it had burst. At length, it righted and settled on its hind legs to the deck.

Dean had begun to scream.

Mikol might have guessed that a dinosaur exploding into view would traumatize a child of Dean's makeup, but, of course, he hadn't. He grabbed the effigy and thrust it to one side—as if removing it a few centimeters would calm Dean. It didn't. Dean went on wailing, his hands at chest height in fortuitous parody of the Allosaurus's forepaws.

"It's all right, Dean," Mikol was saying. "Look. It's okay. A make-believe lizard. See. A plaything."

Despite the threat of ear damage, I picked Dean up.

Meanwhile, Etsuko Endo, Thom Koon, and Sidonia Montoya came rushing in to us from the main polyped. A covey of children in bright paper tunics, muu-muus, dhotis, or jumpsuits crowded in behind the adults to satisfy their own curiosity. One little girl patted Dean's rump and said, "Shhh, shhh," as I also tried to shush him, but the others either flocked to the dinosaur or clamped their palms over their ears.

"Holy crow!" Dean screamed. *"Mon-stuhrrr!"*

"He could mean you," I told Kazimierz Mikol.

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Mikol moved one hand in a rapid back-and-forth arc to keep the kids from the fabriloon. "I'm sorry, Gwiazda. You can't think I wanted *this*. I figured the instant manifestation of a dinosaur would, well, tickle him." He slapped the knuckles of Danny Chung-Barnett, who had weaseled far enough into the corner to grab the effigy's turquoise scrotum.

"Can't you de-pop it?" Etsuko asked over Dean's spookily modulating wail.

"Of course. See this." Mikol pointed to a navy-blue spot behind the fabriloon's left eye. "Watch."

He jabbed the spot. With a flatulent keen, the Allosaurus collapsed, rekernelized itself, and began to hiss—so that we could find it again. Mikol grabbed up the tiny eye-eye before the Chung-Barnett kid could pounce on and flee with it.

Dean stopped wailing. Chagrined, Mikol told Etsuko, Thom, and Sidonia what had happened. Herding children before them, they went back to the polyped's main activity area, leaving Mikol to struggle with the necessity of apologizing to Dean. To his credit, Mikol apologized.

Insofar as I had perceived him as an enemy, in the next few moments Kazimierz Mikol ceased to exist. The cynic who had viewed my son as a deadly obstacle to our colonizing mission to Epsilon Eridani vanished as suddenly as had the eye-eye dinosaur, leaving behind no speck of grit to flash-reconstitute his hostile persona.

"If carnivorous lizards are out," he said, "what *would* make a good present for Dean?"

"Stars," I said. "Try stars."

After the debacle in the polyped, Mikol actually resolved to do as I had suggested. He would bestow upon Dean a gift of stars—not by escorting him to an observatory viewport, but instead by allowing Dean to accompany him to Helena Brodkorb's last rites in D-Tower. This trip, over a fifteen-mile arc of the top side of *Annie*'s wheel, would take a good half hour and expose Dean to all the stars salted into the engulfing bowl of space. Seen from the bubbletop on our perimeter car, these stars would prickle, blaze, shimmer, dim, and flare out again: an unceasing festival of light. Dean would watch it all as if bewitched.

"I don't know," I said. "A ride in a perimeter car may terrify him as much as—"

"A fabriloon from the late Cretaceous?"

"Exactly."

"He's had a good look at stars before. You and his mother made sure of that on his birthday."

"But he's never set foot outside G-Tower."

Mikol appealed to Dean. "You don't want to spend the rest of your life in G-Tower. When we go into parking orbit around New Home, you don't plan to nest in the polyped while everybody else is down exploring the planet. Do you?"

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"No surh." Puzzlement and hurt clouded Dean's face. "Nod if . . . I doan huvh to."

"Good for you. So. Would you like to go for a little ride in Peeter?"

Peeter was the name I'd given the perimeter car officially allotted to Towers G-H. Take *rim* from *perimeter*, and you have our magnetic conveyance's pet monicker. It's a silly sort of joke. We call *Annie*'s other three perimeter cars Pauli, MARE (Magnetic Arc-Ranging Elevated), and Albertina. In any case, Mikol spoke the name Peeter on purpose—to flatter me?—even though, as he later confessed, he could not decide if it were genuinely clever or only unbearably cute.

"Yez," Dean said. "I wuhd like to ride."

"But he doesn't want to attend the funeral," I said. "Just the sight of sleepers in bioracks—"

"Then he doesn't have to," Mikol cut in. "He can go to the polyped and virch with the other ankle biters."

"Then I'll ride along too."

"Master Gwiazda, do you want your silver-tongued old man to go over to D-Tower with us?"

Solemnly, Dean nodded.

"Then it's settled," Mikol said. "To give ourselves plenty of time, we'll leave at 0750 hours."

Peeter, our magnetic bubbletop, tracked along the front top edge of *Annie Jump*'s breathtaking wheel of underslung hydrogen tanks. From our perches in the car, we could see *Fritz Zwicky* running parallel to us, a ring of diamonds twinkling beyond the silver Möbius strip of our own ark. *Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar* was an opalescent sheen somewhere off to port. The other two arks were dimly visible to us, of course, only because of their running lights and the mirrored glow from the exhausts of their braking rockets.

Three distinct motions had their common vectors in our rim car: the bubbletop's tortoiselike crawl toward D-Tower, the gravity-producing circumvolution of *Annie*'s fuel ring, and the starward progress of our ark at point-ten *c*. It seemed to me that these countervailing forces should have ripped us from limb to limb, that our brains and entrails should have flown outward like loose meat in a centrifuge. Instead, we journeyed without incident, three casual travelers poking along the edge of a hurricane slingshot at high speed at infinity.

Dean couldn't keep his eyes off the sky. Starlight sluiced over us like quinine water and guava punch. An alien vista of the Milky Way, familiar but wildly intense. Whorls of gas and dust, a trail of spun sugar crystal. Individual stars guttered and prickled, twinkled and blazed. Nearer to hand, across from us, the underside of *Annie*'s fuel wheel gleamed like the tracks of an archangelic railroad.

"All right, cowboy," Mikol said. "Whaddaya think?"

Dean, his eyes aflicker, continued to gape into the sprawl of God's candelabra.

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"Mr. Mikol asked you a question, Dean."

"My friends call me Kaz," Mikol said.

"*Kaz,* that is," I said.

(I'd wondered if he had any friends. Bao referred to him only as a professional colleague, and a nettlesomely frosty one at that.)

"Suhr?" Dean said, fuddled.

"Mr. Mikol—Kaz—wants to know what you think of all this."

A second or two lapsed before Dean could find the words he wanted: "Priddy. Holy crow, very priddy."

Kaz patted Dean's knee and laughed.

Peeter inched ahead—in a steep, gleaming silence that held the three of us like prehistoric waterwalkers in a blister of see-through resin. The wheel turned as Peeter inched as *Annie* leapt gully after gulley of the interstellar chasm. . . .

Then Kaz—our old nemesis, Kazimierz Mikol—began to talk, his hands in his lap, the methodical wheel of his mind dipping memories from the millstream of his boyhood:

"My grandfather was an immigrant from the liberated Warsaw Pact nations of eastern Europe. He settled in newly democratic Cuba and set up a small factory in the foothills of the Sierra Maestra, manufacturing a vehicle of his own design that ran on a nonpolluting, replenishable fuel distilled from pig shit and sugar-cane fibers. Cuba had lots of pig shit and sugar cane. Grandfather Alexej's oldest son, Milan, who attended university in Poland in the double-twenties, developed the Mikol Process, a type of nanomechanization that brought down the price of the Sabio, our most popular model, so that even streetcleaners in Havana could afford to buy and drive one. In fact, Milan Mikol, my father, stands in relation to my birth century, at least in Cuba, as Henry Ford stood to the twentieth century in North America."

Kaz had apparently aimed this speech at me, for Dean had tuned him out right after the second mention of pig shit. In our bubbletop, Dean hung beneath the stars like an Earth kid on a midsummer swing.

"I grew up with a sister, Marisa, afflicted with a host of weaknesses that forced my mother to devote herself to her like a nurse. You or I would say that Marisa had cerebral palsy, with severe hemiplegia and ataxia. Mama denied this and said her disabilities stemmed not from brain trauma at birth, but from the influence of an individious toxin made in the States and sprayed relentlessly on the cane crops of our province. No matter. Marisa had many handicaps; at first, not even constant attention and coaxing enabled her to learn to speak."

Kaz's story had begun to make me uncomfortable. I looked past Dean, who sat between Kaz and me, and asked, "Why tell me all this?"

"Just listen, okay?" Annoyed, he resumed: "The year I was thirteen, Marisa turned eight, and my mother's youngest sister, Helena, just then ten or eleven, jetted over with the Brodkorbs from Poznan—for a visit and a reunion. Helena spelled Mother with Marisa. She spelled me, too, because, hating the task, I now often found myself acting as a care

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provider. I may have welcomed little Helena to Ciudad Sabio even more vigorously than my mother had, because Helena's presence freed me to swim, hike, and play *beisbol.*

"That same autumn, a movie company from Florida built an amusement park on Pico Torquino, the tallest mountain in Cuba, only a few kilometers from our Sabio factory. The jewel of this set was a Ferris wheel that the filmmakers erected as close to Torquino's summit as they could safely get it. Then, once production had halted, the company's publicity department let it be known, in and around the Sierra Maestra, that locals could ride the Ferris wheel for the equivalent of fifteen American dollars a person on the last three days of October. After the last ride, the company would dismantle the device and return Torquino to its more or less natural state, prior to production.

"Marisa heard of the Ferris wheel. By this time, she had a computer that gave her a voice—a lilting little girl's voice—and she told Mama that she wanted to ride Vireo Films' greatly ballyhooed amusement. She wanted this boon as a birthday gift, before Vireo's roustabouts broke the wheel down and shipped it back to Florida. But, of course, if my parents granted Marisa this wish, they couldn't allow her to ride the Ferris wheel's gondola alone.

"I would have to go with her. I despised North American films and the nauseating hoopla that went with them, and so I absolutely hated this idea. I fact, I had a perverse nostalgia for the days of Fidel Castro, the sort of socialistic idealism that only the well-off son of a millionaire capitalist could afford to indulge. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to take Marisa.

"Helena intervened. She said *she* would ride with Marisa, if Diego, our household's major-domo, drove the two of them up Pico Torquino to Vireo's make-believe amusement park. (Even at thirteen, I heard this last phrase as an egregious bourgeois tautology.) She said it was fine if I chose to stay home, for the combined altitudes of the peak and the Ferris wheel would probably simply cause my snotty nose to bleed. This insult—reverse psychology?—worked, and I angrily offered myself up as Marisa's guardian on this expedition after all. Two evenings later, Diego drove Marisa, Helena, and me up the mountain so we could ride in one of the bright gondolas of the film company's Ferris wheel."

I began to see—dimly, at least—where Kaz was going with this story.

"We rode the wheel—Marisa, Helena, and I. We rode it an hour after sunset. Marisa sat between me and her pretty young aunt from Poznan. What can I say? My nose didn't bleed, but the combined heights of Torquino and that stately illuminated wheel made me tremble like a palmetto leaf in the salty October wind. Believe me, I shivered uncontrollably. Marisa, however, loved the entire experience.

"When our gondola stopped at the top of the wheel and swung back and forth in its gyros, with the south Cuba coast and the smoky mirror of the sea arrayed below us like glossy infrared photographs, Marisa barked her approval—a clipped, excited gasp; a call from the heart. The

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wheel itself blazed, and the stars of autumn . . . *Dios mío,* some of them seemed to swim in and out of view, shyly, like bronze or pewter carp."

Kaz fell silent.

I laughed nervously. "Remind me never to challenge you to a duel of similes."

"What I understand now," Kaz finally went on, "is that in that Ferris wheel gondola, poised above the darkened island, I loved Marisa, I loved Helena, and I loved the simple day-to-day astonishments of living. Down from Pico Torquino, however, the world—my world, anyway—seemed to change. The Brodkorbs went back to Poland. My mother returned to fussing over Marisa and ignoring the rest of us.

"By the following February, my parents had divorced. Mama, taking Marisa with her, rejoined her sister's family in Poznan, and my father immersed himself in design revisions, production goals, marketing strategies. He died four years later, on a business trip to New York, when Sashimi, a guild of militant Japanese whalers, exploded a pocket nuclear device in a subway tunnel under Grand Central Station. I was in my first year at Havana Tech, gearing up to study particle physics and vacuum propulsion systems."

Even though it seemed that he had just begun another story, Kaz stopped.

"Is that all?" I asked.

"All my life, I blamed Marisa for the loss of my parents. Two days ago, upon learning of Helena's death, I remembered something I couldn't quite remember. Please don't laugh. You see, this incomplete memory softened me. Only when we boarded Peeter and started crawling toward D-Tower did the memory come totally back to me. I have just told it to you, Dr. Gwiazda."

"Abel."

"Abel, then."

Peeter docked with the observatory complex at the summit of D-Tower. Dean had a crick from staring heavenward during our crossing—so, while ambling through the docking connector, he bemusedly rubbed his neck.

In D-Tower, despite *my* misgivings, I believe it gratified Kaz—oddly gratified him—when Dean insisted on going with us to Helena's memorial service: the voiding. (This last term offends me even more than does *ejection,* but, over our trip's past quarter century, it has gained currency and a certain cachet; the puns it embodies are, if nothing else, vivid and expressive.) Kaz realized that Dean wanted more to keep him, his newfound friend, in sight than to attend the funeral of a stranger, but I set aside my objections, and all three of us turned up on part of the observatory deck given over to, well, voidings.

To Kaz's obvious surprise, thirteen people, including our party from G-Tower, had come to honor Helena, who lay, just as promised, on the lingula of the ejector tube.

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Commander Stefan Odenwald himself, looking distinguished but gaunt, headed this group of mourners, which also comprised Chaplain Mother Sevier and eight of Helena's friends and colleagues. The service, which I thought dignified and painfully moving, featured brief prayer readings by Odenwald and Chaplain Mother Sevier, a few words by a fellow geneticist, and a holovid of fifteen-year-old Helena singing *"Dona Nobis Pacem"* in a soprano as clear and chilling as ice water.

The holovid scared Dean, but didn't send him careening away from the ceremony. He grabbed my arm and held to it like Quasimodo clinging to a bell rope, his gaze shifting back and forth between the shimmering image of young Helena crooning like an angel and her aged-looking corpse, recognizable even to Dean as a transfigured but silent version of the beautiful hologhost. Adding to the eeriness of this experience was the fact that young Helena sang her part in rounds with an unseen orpianoogla and an invisible mixed choir. Indeed, their anthem echoed hauntingly throughout the deck.

At its conclusion, Odenwald said, "Mr. Mikol, as Helena Brodkorb's only living relative aboard *Annie Jump Cannon,* you have—if you wish it—the privilege of eulogizing her."

Kaz walked to the lingula, to stand in almost exactly the spot where the hologhost had sung. Bending, he kissed Helena's cold temple.

"From Pico Torquino to Epsilon Eridani," he said, standing erect again, "Helena Brodkorb was not afraid of heights. She dwelt on them. Like Harry Martinson, she knew that 'space can be more cruel than man, / more than its match is human callousness.' And so, unlike me, she was never cruel."

Which was all Kaz could steady himself to say. He put a hand over his mouth and stared at Helena's sunken eyes and lovely complexion. Meanwhile, Dean threaded a path through the other mourners to stand next to Kaz in mute condolence.

Odenwald said, "Shall we commend her now to the stars?"

Kaz nodded.

The lingula on which Helena Brodkorb lay retracted into its tube. A maintenance tech among the mourners used a remote to seal the tube and activate its plunger. Although no one on the deck could see her go, Kaz's dead aunt hurtled outward like a torpedo—far beyond the gravitational attraction of any of the armada's wheelships.

"Because we're decelerating," Commander Odenwald observed, "Helena Brodkorb will reach Epsilon Eridani before us."

"And eventually pass on out of the system into interstellar space again," said a colleague.

The company fell silent again. No one appeared to want to move.

After a time, I said: "May I speak?"

When Chaplain Mother Sevier nodded, I recited:

"So very human,
To grieve and to entomb.

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This ardent woman
We cremate in the cold.

No longer may we hold
Her from her spacious home."

"Amen," said Chaplain Mother Sevier, crossing herself.

Finally, we funeral goers broke up and departed.

Back in G-Tower, Kaz opted to remain up-phase for the remainder of our armada's voyage. He has been spelling me with Dean as once, years ago, Helena Brodkorb spelled his mother and him with his handicapped sister, Marisa.

We have entered the Barricado Stream, a region a good deal less clogged with debris than a few of our astronomers had earlier supposed. The probe dropped by *Zwicky* has determined recently that the Stream hosts only one substantial cometary mass per each sphere the approximate size of the Earth's orbit around Sol. Good news. Very good news.

"There's hardly any chance at all we'll hit a comet," Nita Sistrunk said yesterday in the G-Tower mess.

But Bao added, "It isn't the comet-sized bodies we must fear. Remember, though, if *big* masses whirl around out here, there may also be smaller but more perfidious bodies impossible to detect at a distance."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You don't really want to know." And Bao deftly changed the direction of our talk.

In any event, more and more personnel aboard our three wheelships have come up-phase. We still have some journeying to do to reach New Home, at least another standard year's worth, but excitement mounts. Also, the staggered awakening of adults from the enchantment of ursidormizine slumber has delighted the children, and each pulse of our matter-antimatter engines seems a quickening heartbeat. The peculiar atmosphere of a seminar-cum-carnival has gripped *Annie;* also *Chandrasekhar* and *Zwicky.*

I wonder if Pharaoh's royal architect had a like sense of culminating accomplishment upon realizing that only a few more blocks would complete his master's pyramid.

Lily has come up-phase. She still can't believe that nasty Kazimierz Mikol has ingratiated himself with Dean—altogether sincerely, however—as a kind of uncle. Nor does she believe that Kaz and I have become friends. And, in fact, I prefer Thich Ngoc Bao's company to his, or Nita Sistrunk's, or Matthew Rashad's, a compatriot among the geologists. Our personalities (mine and Kaz's, that is) scrape against rather than complement each other's.

Nevertheless, we've hammered out a crumpled sort of mutual respect. Lily can't imagine how. I've told her about Helena Brodkorb's death and our rim-car trip to and from D-Tower, but, not having experienced these

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herself, she remains skeptical of everything about Kaz except his clear, if startling, affection for Dean.

"It's like the tiger and the lamb on the same bed of straw," she says. "A fearful symmetry whose opposing balances I can't quite grasp."

"Don't try," I tell her. "Just enjoy."

Lily simply shakes her head and laughs, a gruff chuckle so like Dean's that I gape. My look prompts more laughter and a sudden peck on my cheek.

"I like you more today than when we first met," she says. "More than on DeBoy's last birthday, even."

"Why is that?"

"You've started going gray," Lily tells me. "I've always liked older men."

Commander Stefan Odenwald stood in *Annie*'s pilot house, supervising its computer-aimed passage through the Barricado. Our other two arks ran parallel to *Annie*'s course at port and starboard distances of about seventy kilometers. Nonetheless, each of the other ships remained dimly visible to everyone in the pilot house, either on TV monitors or through the shielded viewports of the domelike bridge. A simultaneous look at the two vessels depended, of course, on the pilot house's rotating to either the top or the bottom of the fuel wheel's orbit vis-à-vis the headlong motion of the other two ships, but this happened often enough to thrill Dean and me, and seldom enough to increase our anticipation.

For a long time, I guess, Odenwald had realized that Dean enjoyed looking at the stars as much as anyone else aboard; therefore, he had invited us into the pilot house, a structure midway between Towers A-B and G-H on the ever-clocking fuel ring, and had there installed Dean in the thronelike chair that inevitably, and a bit sardonically, we call the Helm, as if it willy-nilly grants its occupant both authority and navigational savvy.

The Helm swallowed Dean. His feet dangled half a meter from the deck, and his chunky little body resembled that of a ventriloquist's dummy. Thankfully, he took no notice of the chair's scale, but turned his neckless head from side to side, ceaselessly ogling the universe.

"You look like—" Odenwald began. He turned to the other officers in the pilot house. "Who? You know, that holovid space explorer, what's-his-name?"

"I'm almost completely ignorant of such entertainments," I admitted—with an undercurrent of pride that Odenwald did not seem to find off-putting. It suggested, as it should, that I had better things to do.

On the other hand, I had often petitioned Odenwald for this audience, here in *Annie*'s control center, for my handicapped son, and surely that petition told him more about me than did any cheap slam at the junk on holovid.

"Cuhn I?" Dean said. "Cuhn I steer?"

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"Have you mastered astronavigation, wheelship helming, and the rights and obligations of cybernetic command?"

"No suhr," Dean told Odenwald meekly.

"Well, then, you can't steer. But you're the only person besides myself to occupy that chair since we left lunar orbit in our own solar system."

"So far as you know," I put in.

Odenwald laughed. "Yes. So far as I know."

The TV monitor taking transmission from the *Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar* showed all of us on the bridge the face of a haggard Caucasian male. I recognized him as one of Commander Joplin's lieutenants, Wolfgang Krieg.

"Attention! Commanders Odenwald and Roosenno, *attention!"* the haggard face said. "We appear to be on a collision course with a stream of frozen debris—gravel, call it—that initially composed a single mass about two meters in circumference. This stream of material—"

Odenwald took the mike. *"Initially?"* he said. "What do you mean, initially? What happened to it?"

"When we radar-sighted the object, we could see it would hit us," Krieg said. "Having no time to change course, we used our laser to try to deflect it."

"By vaporizing one side of the body to push it in another direction?" Odenwald theorized.

"Yessir," Krieg said.

"But, instead of moving aside, the object fragmented?"

"Yessir. The resulting stream of debris will strike us in two minutes fifty-three seconds."

Odenwald said, "How may we assist?"

"Get yourselves out of here," Krieg replied. "You might also want to pray."

Odenwald gave an order to activate the siphons to draw fuel from the C-D to E-F hydrogen tanks down the spokes to their matter-antimatter propulsion system. Kaz appeared from nowhere to do exactly that, while Odenwald ran the ignition programs. Bridge officers on *Zwicky* followed suit. Despite their size, both wheelships shoved agilely ahead, out of the energy-saving coast marking the latest stage of our years-long deceleration process.

"Don't look at the exhaust trail!" I told Dean.

But Dean *was* looking at it, a blazing bore of magnesium-white light that had already turned our wheel's opposite inner arc into an eye-stinging mirror. If he kept looking at it, he'd burn out his retinas. Blessedly, just as I started to push his face into his lap, Dean averted his gaze.

At that instant, the monitor receiving from *Chandrasekhar* filled with popping kinetic snow. *Chandrasekhar* itself, one instant past a platinum ring on a bolster of sequined black felt, flashed out like a miniature nova, a wound of radiance even brighter than *Annie*'s exhaust trail. Then, after the flash, in the place where the space ark had been: nothing but

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blackness. Every light on its rim, every light in its habitat towers, snapped out.

Immediately, though, a series of explosions on the wheel went off in astonishing sequence, like a silent Fourth of July gala with Roman candles, phosphorus bombs, and self-shredding parachutes of light. The sight of these distant fireworks froze me in place, for, as the disaster unraveled, there was nothing that anyone on either of our sibling arks could do—except imagine both the terror and the agony of our companions aboard the splintering ship.

Later, Bao and others postulated, the biggest chunk of the fragmented rock tracking *Chandrasekhar* had hit and severed its rim. Simultaneously, the gravel from Krieg's misguided attempt to deflect this object ripped into the fuel spokes *cum* support cables. Then centrifugal force took over, tearing the vessel apart. Broken tentacles of diamond writhed in the blackness. The electromagnetic levitation tanks holding the antihydrogen ice clear of the ordinary matter making up the ark's set-apart propulsion unit took ricocheting hits of their own, emitting, as a result, such hot bursts of radiation that the sky flared again and many of the ark's buckled compartments actually began to melt.

This catastrophe stunned me. I could think of nothing very like it in the history of spacefaring. The *Challenger* disaster might qualify, or the fate of the Chinese ship *Wuer Kaixi* off Titan late in 2057, but these events seemed so remote, and so happily limited in their life-taking scale, that the emptiness off to starboard, the afterglow of so many doomed lives, left me groping for some competent or humane response.

"Whuh?" Dean murmured. "Whud happen?"

Odenwald looked at him. Dean, in turn, looked to him for some hopeful reordering of the chaos that had inflicted itself on the sky outside our blister.

The incandescence, then the cold.

The kaleidoscopic brightness, then the dark.

"Please tell him, sir," I said. "And don't sugarcoat it."

Voices from *Fritz Zwicky* rattled in the pilot house. Radio operators in the communications well bent to their tasks. Two of Odenwald's lieutenants rushed in from the attached day room and lounge. Their concern—their activity—could not reverse the fate of *Chandrasekhar* or rescue a single person in any of its radiation-drenched habitation towers. All, like data in an irretrievably crashed program, were gone or going, already almost less than ciphers.

But it was Kaz, not Odenwald, who finally knelt in front of Dean's chair. "They hit something, or something hit them. A chunk of ice about like so." Kaz made a circle of his arms. "Maybe even a little smaller. Which split into pieces when the people on *Chandry* tried to move it."

"Bud how . . . ?"

"As fast as we're going, hitting an object that size makes a bang like the burst of a fission device." Kaz looked at me. "Sorry. He's never heard of Hiroshima, right? Or the Sashimi attacks on New York and L.A.?"

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"Cuhd id happen to uz?"

Kaz looked to me for permission. I nodded.

"Yes, it could," Kaz said. "At the moment, though, we're outrunning the blast. If this helps at all, Dean, we should go fairly quickly if we hit something."

Dean began to cry. "I'm sorry thad happen," he said. "I'm sorree-sorree."

"Me too," Kaz said.

Odenwald came over and said he wanted Dean and me off the bridge. I picked Dean up, and Odenwald advised us to retreat to the day room while he spoke with Roosenno and some of his lieutenants about the morale and logistical implications of the disaster.

Dean and I left.

Two hours later, when it seemed to Odenwald and his closest advisors, including Bao, that we'd outrun any pursuing debris, our ships cut their engines and drifted back into the coasting mode of our long advance on Epsilon Eridani II.

If we survive the Stream, none of us will ever forget what has happened out here. Ever.

Mere chance enabled Dean to witness the destruction of another wheelship. Nonetheless, I blame myself for putting him in a place to see the spectacular melting or vaporization of sixteen-hundred human beings.

And Dean? He understands that *Chandrasekhar* and all its passengers have passed into physical oblivion. Kaz and I both tell him it's possible that God has received their souls, but, despite my religion, I remain a militant skeptic on this point, and Dean no longer asks if the victims of the disaster have gone to heaven. It both frets and wearies him to hear me say, "Dean, I don't know."

He also grasps, by the way, the perilousness of traveling at even a mere fraction of light-speed. He knows that *Annie Jump* or *Fritz Zwicky* could blaze out, novalike, as Commander Joplin's wheelship did. This knowledge has penetrated his awareness as deeply as, if not more deeply than, anything else he has ever learned. Sometimes (for me, red-letter occasions for guilt and moroseness), he remembers the catastrophe, bolts upright, and begins to rock and sway.

"Why?" he says. "Why?"

The basic existential inquiry.

And I wonder if Lily and I sinned against Dean, ourselves, or the incessant nag of the life force by bringing him to be in this precarious flying tin can.

Kaz says to ice the gloom-and-doom, the self-debates, the ontological kvetching.

A word to the wise? Not with *this* target audience: I don't qualify.

An arkboard month has passed. We have broken clear of the Barricado

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Stream—computationally, if not in our hearts. Our learned astronomers inform us that we have wide riding ahead, unobstructed glissading to New Home. Scant solace to the dead, of course, and scant comfort to either Dean or me.

More than once I've tried to eulogize the victims of this prodigious calamity. My words back up on me; my rhymes, even the off ones, don't quite slot; my rhythms, sprung or unsprung, drill like drugged anacephalics in jackboots. At last I wrote a stanza:

With a charged, chance suddenness,
The all of spinning Chandrasekhar,
The all of its ark, flashed to dark and spun to less
Than a heat-dead, hooded star:
A nova, an aura, an aroma of light-speed-sizzled thought,
Brains broiled, skin fried, the atomizing mystery and mess,
Actinic sabotage of each blind arrogance we bought
With the hardware-software-psycheware of our ever-shoving-onward
high-tech-tied success.

Yesterday Bao asked if I've made any headway on the elegy everyone assumes I'll write. Reluctantly, I showed him this stanza. "Read it aloud," he said. There in the G-Tower mess, I lowered both head and voice and recited it.

Only Bao, thank God, could hear me. Kaz would have flung my comp-pad aside and stalked off, to seek better company in the finch-filled atrium.

"That's pretty," Bao said. A dig.

"So was the little mishap that triggered it."

"True. But I would have never taken you, my friend, for a Hopkins enthusiast."

This remark startled me. Bao had realized from the get-go that the paradigm for my stanza was an elegy by Gerard Manley Hopkins. I sat back and stared at him.

"Nor I you," I said.

Bao laughed. Then, with no physical prompts whatsoever, he recited:

"With a mercy that outrides
The all of water, an ark
For the listener; for the lingerer with a love glides
Lower than death and the dark;
A vein for the visiting of the past-prayer, pent in prison,
The-last-breath penitent spirits—the uttermost mark
Our passion-plunged giant risen,
The Christ of the Father compassionate, fetched in the storm of his strides."

"How can you do that?" I said. "Remember it all?"

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Bao laughed again. "Stanza thirty-three. Because I've had Heraclitus call it up repeatedly since the accident. Balm from a long-dead Jesuit."

"I would have never taken you for an incarnationist, Bao, and certainly not one of a papist stamp."

Nothing marred Bao's hollow-cheeked amiability. "The wise take their comfort where they can."

"The wise seldom choke down such bilge."

Bao, grunting, grabbed his chest as if I'd just slipped a blade into his heart. He recovered at once, a fey smile on his lips. "Your stanza clatters where the Jesuit's sings, my dear unable Abel."

"Then I guess I'd better delete it."

"Ah, a wiser man than I'd supposed." He put a hand on my wrist. "Don't, though. Save it, as a ward against hubris." He released me, finished eating his vegetable shell, and, with a smile and a bad parting joke, excused himself. None of Bao's observations on either wisdom or comfort-taking had recast my own opinions; however, sitting and talking with him had cheered me. I kept the lone stanza of my come-a-cropper elegy, but attempted no others.

Later, in a geology carrel, I had Heraclitus call up "The Wreck of the Deutschland" and read it twice from beginning to end. If mere language can redeem a disaster, I believe Hopkins redeemed his.

Fuel rings turning like mountain-high Ferris wheels, *Annie Jump* and *Fritz Zwicky* have completely traversed the Barricado Stream. We have penetrated the orbit of Epsilon Eridani V, the system's outermost planet, an ice ball known to every member of our expedition as Cold Cock. New Home lies nearly 5.7 billion kilometers farther in, in the direction of Eppie herself; and our fleet, calamitously dispossessed of one of its arks, flies at a scant percentage of light-speed, a million kilometers per hour. At this rate, given the need to slow still more, it will take almost a year to reach our destination.

The hydrogen harvesters we deployed shortly after entering the Barricado, great funnels of molecularly strengthened mylar, will not only add calibrated drag to our deceleration, but resupply the exhausted tanks on the rim arcs between habitat towers. From the G-Tower observatory, it sometimes appears that we haul behind us the iridescent bladders of immense Portuguese men-of-war. Floats or wings? No one seems to know how to regard them. Sometimes, we can't see them at all. In any case, gathering hydrogen makes little sense, given that, by the time we reach New Home, our ships will have almost wholly depleted the antihydrogen ice required by our matter-antimatter rockets for further travel.

Ours not to reason why . . .

Days (or arkboard hours comprising their equivalent) ghost past as our last two vessels simultaneously plummet and wheel through this alien system. Up-phase scientists, technicians, engineers, and support personnel work methodically to prepare for planetfall and the colonization of New Home. Much of this preparation—plan comparisons, logistical projections, computer simulations—has to do with adjusting for the

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loss of the vital skills and labor units destroyed along with Commander Joplin's *Subrahmanyan Chadrasekhar*. On the other hand, our expedition's organizers factored in an atoning redundancy: personnel on any one ark can meet and overcome, by themselves, the environmental challenges of our target world. If a disaster befalls *Zwicky*, then *Annie* has the wherewithal to succeed.

And, of course, vice versa.

Less than halfway to the gas giant Jawbreaker (named for its bands of umber, licorice, and cherry, as well as for the fact that it has more than twice the mass of Jupiter), an astronomy group met with Odenwald in the observatory. This group (as Thich Ngoc Bao told me later that same evening) consisted of Nita Sistrunk, Indira Seschachari, Pete Ohanessian, and Bao himself.

Actually, after putting Dean to bed in our cubicle on the mezzanine level, I hitched a lift to the observatory for some private time to unwind and found Bao slumped in a swivel chair in a consultation bay not far from the ABVT. The door to this bay stood open, and, upon sighting Bao, who had made himself uncharacteristically scarce for the past seventy-two hours, I slipped in and greeted him.

"Hey."

Bao jumped as if I'd popped an eye-eye in front of him. Recognizing me, he composed himself and gave me a wan grin. His skin looked sallow, drum-tight.

"Doctor," I said, "what's up?"

"The jig," said Bao. "Old American expression. The game is over. Our hopes are dashed. Or, at least, a hefty plenty of them."

I sat down in a swiveler across from Bao, in front of an HD screen as big as a door. "We're surfing different wavelengths, friend o' mine."

"Tonight," Bao said, "our group presented to Odenwald the radio, spectrographic, and visual evidence that New Home may not be habitable to human beings."

My gut corkscrewed around itself. "Come again."

"We did so—Indira, Nita, Pete, and I—as if discussing mutation rates in fruit flies. Very professionally. As if our findings had only hypothetical significance to our arkmates and the people on *Zwicky*. In truth, we all felt blown away, Abel—nuked, one could say."

I leaned forward. "Bao, are you violating confidentiality telling me this?"

"I hardly think so. Tomorrow morning, the news will have spread all over both ships."

"Then go ahead. Tell me."

Bao rocked back, resting his ankle on his knee. "All right. Nita showed Odenwald a series of photographs—computer amplified and enhanced—revealing New Home as an ugly-looking marble, a hard little sphere rotating under drifting rinds of reddish-brown dust and ejecta. The water we discovered by spectrographic analysis while outside the Barricado lay

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hidden under enmantling dust. Odenwald stared at us—his magi, so to speak—as if we'd led Herod right to him."

"Ejecta?" I said. "What's going on? Volcanic activity? A worldwide dust storm?"

"Odenwald asked the same question, and Nita said, 'The dust storm's real enough, but Bao worries more about its causes.'

" 'What do you think's happened?' Odenwald asked me.

"I told him that not long ago—possibly just before we drew within the orbit of the fifth planet—an asteroidal object the size of Mexico City burned through New Home's atmosphere and impacted with the surface. The stratospheric blizzard wrapping the planet derives from material crater-blasted upward by this nomadic body's impact.

"Odenwald turned over one of Nita's lovely gloomy photos, as if its other side would nullify my words. When it didn't, he thoughtfully replaced it in its sequence.

" 'What does this mean for us?' he asked. 'As refugees in search of a livable world?'

" 'Nothing good,' Pete Ohanessian said.

" 'Itemize, please,' Odenwald insisted.

"Nita reached over and touched his wrist—trying, you see, to console him. Meanwhile, though, she told him that infrared absorption spectroscopy would give us the best look at current conditions on the planet.

" 'Dr. Seschachari has the results,' she said. 'Indira?' "

Here, Indira had showed him a slide. So Bao punched a button, and the very slide in question flashed up on the HD screen behind me. When I swung about in my chair to look at it, an arrow jumped onto the screen over New Home's latest IR absorption spectrum.

Bao resumed his story:

"Indira said, 'This slide compares data taken on the trip out with more recently obtained info. This peak at around ten microns' "—the arrow landed on it—" 'is carbon dioxide, and you can see from the corresponding peak here' "—the arrow bounced again—" 'that the atmosphere's carbon dioxide content has risen dramatically as a result of the collision. We hypothesize that the vaporization of a lot of carbonate rock—namely, limestone—from the asteroid strike triggered the jump in CO_2. You can also add to that the CO_2 produced by the combustion of biomass—grasses, trees, who knows what else?—in the resulting firestorm. But even more alarming is that the levels of carbon dioxide continue to rise.'

" 'Why?' Odenwald demanded."

Indira told him she'd get back to that and noted that the second peak on the spectrum represented the absorption from the NO molecule, nitric oxide. Bao, quoting Dr. Seschachari, said that fumes from nitric oxide present two real problems for would-be colonists. First, the acid has a bite. Only idiots would try to land with it contaminating the ecosphere. Second, and even worse, the nitric acid has apparently begun to release even more carbon dioxide from New Home's limestone. To get an idea of

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the process, think of sodium carbonate—ordinary baking soda—in a bath of vinegar, fizzing away.

"Cripes, Bao, you've got to be kidding."

"I wish." He got up and began to pace. "Pete Ohanessian took over from Indira and told Odenwald that the most efficient natural mechanism for removing CO_2 from a world's atmosphere is probably photosynthesis. Unfortunately, Abel, we think the asteroid strike and the firestorm have wiped out all but about 5 percent of New Home's vegetation. God, or Fate, has smashed the thermostat on that planet. When New Home comes out of its Ice Age—below-freezing temperatures everywhere, all a result of the dust cloud shrouding it—Pete thinks the planet could fall victim to the runaway greenhouse effect."

In this scenario, Bao told me, atmospheric CO_2 provokes warming via standard greenhouse action. Carbon dioxide levels in cold water drop with added temperature, even more CO_2 outgasses as CO_2 once dissolved in polar oceans comes out of solution. Hence, even faster warming. As temperatures keep going up, the seas begin to evaporate, and H_2O is a more powerful greenhouse gas than CO_2. Water and carbon dioxide working together slow the escape of infrared energy into space. The hotter New Home grows, the more water vapor in its atmosphere: a steady ramping up of the greenhouse effect. Many thick blanketlike layers swaddle the planet, letting solar heat in but trapping the heat generated below. Eventually, New Home's equatorial seas start to boil.

"New Home seems to be something of a misnomer," I said.

Bao chuckled mirthlessly. "Well, perhaps not. We've done some very careful modeling to establish how close the planet is to the edge of Epsilon Eridani's habitable zone. It does lie on the inward edge of the zone, but at sufficient distance from Eppie to avoid a complete greenhouse runaway."

"Won't things ever get back to normal?"

"What's normal?" Bao said. "But, of course, that's what Odenwald wanted to know. Pete told him that a counterbalancing geological process could reverse the situation." Bao grinned a dare at me. "Any idea what it is, *Dr.* Gwiazda?"

The question took me off guard. "Weathering?"

"You're the geology man. I'm asking you."

"Weathering," I said more forcefully.

"Care to explain it?"

"Spectroscopy implies New Home's mantle consists of calcium and magnesium silicates, right?"

"I guess so. Pete, at least, concurs."

"Then the planet's atmospheric CO_2 will react slowly with these silicates to make calcium and magnesium carbonate. The process speeds up in hot, damp air, binding carbon dioxide into the planet's limestone. Temperatures drop. With this cooling, water vapor precipitates out. The greenhouse effect decreases, along with the temperature. In the end, New Home returns to 'normal.' How long will it take? I don't know. My

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specialty is soils. And we still don't know the percentage of anorthitic rock in New Home's exposed crust."

Bao smiled. "Maybe you should have briefed Odenwald too."

"What time-scale estimate did Pete offer?"

"He hemmed and hawed. I don't blame him. We lack solid values for anorthitic rock and the rate of vulcanism."

"Come on, Bao."

"A century or so. For sure, less than two hundred years. Maybe as few as fifty."

Hearing this, I thought first of Dean, now asleep in Lily's care. Such news would crush him. Lily, too. It was crushing *me,* like sixteen tons of granite on my chest. Had we traveled more than a century to reach a world that would accept us as colonists only after we had stewed in our bioracks another one hundred years?

"Yes," Bao said. "New Home's something of a misnomer." He punched a button on the arm of his chair and the speakers next to the HD screen activated. A recorded discussion garbled past on fast-forward. Bao stopped it. "After Pete talked, some of my colleagues got silly. Listen."

Nita: "Dead End might be a better name."

Indira: "Or Crater Quake."

Pete: "Or Pot Hole. Or Acid Bath."

Nita: "Gloomandoom!"

Indira: "Bitter Pill! Or maybe—"

Bao: "That's enough!"

Odenwald: "Easy, Bao—I was about to propose an irreverent name of my own."

Bao: "Sir, the purpose of this session is to brief you, not to divert ourselves."

Odenwald: "Maybe we should divert *Annie* to another planet in this system."

Nita: "Which? Jelly Belly? Red Hot?"

Pete: "The gravity on Jawbreaker would crush us. We'd do as well to set down on Eppie herself."

Nita: "Or as ill."

Bao: "We should continue to New Home. First-hand studies of the environmental aftermath of an asteroid strike this large are virtually nonexistent. We should follow up."

Indira: "But for whose sake?"

Odenwald: "You all have your work. I have mine. And my first duty is to break the news."

Nita: "You'll break hearts as well."

Pete: "A better time might be—"

Odenwald: "Traveling at nearly a million klicks per hour, there's no time like the present."

Bao halted the recording.

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"Nita was right," I said. "The news has broken my heart. And it's sure to break others."

Bao toasted me with an imaginary shot glass, then slugged back its imaginary contents.

Lily broke the bad tidings to Dean. She insisted on her prerogative in this. In his self-appointed role as goduncle, Kaz tagged along.

We took Dean to a glade in the atrium, a stand of sycamores bonsai'd artfully near a waterfall encased in a sort of panpipe of clear plastic. In this secluded place, the falling water, pump-driven and -recirculated, made its tremulous woodwind and brook music.

Kaz lifted Dean to a notch in one of the sycamores and then tactfully wandered away. Lily took up a post beside Dean, to catch him if he slipped, while I sat on a bench masquerading as a ledge on the face of our miniature cascade.

Finches warbled, and, not far away, another party murmured among themselves, their talk a faint counterpoint to the water noise and the nonstop background hum.

"DeBoy, I have to tell you a very unpleasant thing," Lily began. "New Home won't be our new home, after all." She told him about our discovery of the recent astroid strike and its meaning for everyone aboard our remaining ships—namely, either a frustrating wait until environmental conditions improved on Eppie's second planet or another long interstellar journey to another solar system with potential for settlement, most likely the Tau Ceti system.

None of this seemed to impress Dean. He sat in the dwarf sycamore gazing upward, and all around, for a glimpse of one of the finches.

"Do you understand me?" Lily asked. "We've come all this way, DeBoy, and New Home may be denied us."

"Yessum." Dean gave her a grudging, shifty-eyed nod.

"It's all right to feel sad. It's even all right to cry."

Our ingrate son kept rubbernecking for birds.

"Dean!"

So quickly did Dean's gaze snap back to Lily that he had to grab a limb. "I *like* id here," he said. "Now thad evvybody's ub . . . *up* . . . I like id jes fine."

Almost against my will, I guffawed.

Lily shot me an I'm-going-to-kill-you glare that modulated, almost against *her* will, into a defeated grin.

Whereupon Hiller Nevels, a botanist named Gulnara Golovin, and Milo Pask, a habitat engineer, came strolling toward us, arguing or at least expostulating among themselves. Golovin had her hand consolingly on Pask's arm, and none of the three seemed at all aware of our own family group, not even when Kaz trudged back into the clearing and halted in some puzzlement at the sight of them.

". . . *won't* get over it!" Pask was saying. "To travel over a century and learn on your final approach that a stupid rock from the sky has turned

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the planet of your dreams into a gas chamber! Why did I come? I'm supposed to build habitat geodesics, water and sewer systems. Now, I can't. I've come all this way for no reason!"

Golovin said, "You can't do your job *now*, that's all this setback means. Wait for the dust and the acid rain to settle out. A kind of normality will return to New Home. What's another year—even two—given all our years in transit? Milo, from the very beginning we knew we were living with a deferred ambition."

"Besides," said Hiller, "we had no guarantee any planet out here would prove a cozy place to camp."

Pask brushed Golovin's hand from his arm and rounded on Hiller. "Maybe not when we set out. But the closer we got to Eppie and the more that thick-headed gook and his star-gazing cronies learned, the more flowery they got about how New Home was Shangri-La and how grandly the place would welcome us. We hadn't come all this way just to rot in our bioracks. So they told us. The incompetent buggers!"

"Except for the asteroid strike, I think they appraised New Home accurately," Golovin said. "I don't see how you can hold them responsible for an act of God."

"We can't even hold *God* responsible for an act of God!" Pask raged. "So I'm scapegoating Thich and his sickening ilk. Do you mind?"

"Irrationality doesn't become you, Milo," Golovin scolded. "Stop it."

"No. But I become it, don't I?" Finally catching sight of Dean, Pask strode over with a weird glimmer in his eyes. "Who could have predicted this turn of events? This kid? Yeah, the kid. *Annie*'s resident . . . gnomic gnome."

Lily said, "Lay off, Milo."

Pask reddened as if she'd disparaged either his engineering skills or his virility, not simply rebuked him for bullying a child.

"What're the odds?" he asked. "What're the odds that New Home would take a lousy asteroid hit during our expedition's final approach?"

"I have no idea," Lily said.

"Well, I'll tell you. Statistically, Dr. Aliosi-Stark, the chances are something like a trillion to one. *A trillion to buggering one!*"

"I don't think so," Lily said.

"You don't, do you?"

"Given the event itself, I'd say that, statistically, the chances are one hundred percent."

Now Pask looked at Lily as if she'd slapped him. His face crumpled. Without attempting to mitigate or hide the fact, he began to cry. Dean followed suit. I took Dean out of the tree and held him. Lily hugged Pask.

"I want to leap into the same swallowing blackness everyone on *Chandrasekhar* leapt into," Pask said.

"You should talk to someone," Lily told him.

"I've talked to Hiller and Gulnara," Pask said. "Now I'm talking to you. Talk doesn't heal, it just turns into more of itself." Regaining a degree of control, he wiped his eyes and reset his twisted features.

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Seeing Pask calm himself, Dean quieted.

"That may be," I said. "But you should still sit down for a while with Etsuko Endo. Soon."

Pask wouldn't commit to this, but Golovin agreed to contact Etsuko on his behalf. Then she and Hiller led him out of the glade, and out of the atrium, in search of someone to dismantle his dread.

Kaz took Dean from me, and Dean leaned his head on Kaz's shoulder. "I like it here," Dean said.

Whether he meant this nook of the atrium or life in general aboard the ark, I had no idea.

New Home—or Acid Bath, or Dead End, or Bitter Pill, as the more mordant of our expedition's surviving members insist on calling the world—has no moon. Not long ago, *Annie Jump* and *Fritz Zwicky* took up orbits about ten thousand kilometers out, orbits that bestow on them—in the minds of our astronomy specialists and a few of our anonymous dreamers—exactly that status.

The two great ships, their own wheels rotating, turn about New Home like diamond-lit satellites, *Annie Jump* half a klick farther out—higher—than *Fritz Zwicky* but otherwise in rough parallel with its sibling. If any sentient species lives on the world below, and if roiling dust didn't veil the night sky from the ground, the sight of our two staggered wheels turning overhead would surely prompt stillness and then awe among their unknowable kind.

Aboard *Annie,* I imagine myself swinging in the gondola of a Ferris wheel on a lofty New Home peak, gazing into the night at this manmade binary cluster. In fact, I go on to imagine myself imagining myself as a passenger on one of our glittering rings. Lost in this double fantasy, I prefer the image of myself in New Home's transfigured sky: Orion orating in the heavens, not some mute Sherpa in the Himalayas.

I want to blaze, not to slog and grapple. Given my choice, I want to god-fashion myself in fire—even if the attempt slays me, even if no one but the greedy homunculus in my own breast hears my Promethean cri de coeur.

At 0800 hours tomorrow—measuring time by Greenwich mean time, as we still do aboard *Annie*—we will boost away from New Home and park ourselves nearer her sun, to begin the refueling process that will eventually take us to Tau Ceti.

The majority of us will travel down-phase, in ursidormizine slumber. Commander Stefan Odenwald will yield the bridge and his primary continuity-preserving duties to Hiller Nevels and a fresh team of self-sacrificing troubleshooters, all volunteers, for Odenwald hopes to wake with legs fresh enough to climb a lovely new peak on the world that we discover and colonize in the Tau Ceti system.

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Who can blame him? He has aged beyond any of the rest of us, excepting only Commander Roosenno, who will stay here in the Epsilon Eridani system, and Commander Joanna Diane Joplin, who ceased aging forever in the fatal millrace of the Barricado Stream.

As noted, the personnel aboard *Zwicky* will remain in orbit around New Home for as long as it takes to outlast the surface inferno brought about by the impact of the asteroid that Bao has named Epimenides, after a figure in Greek mythology who, while seeking a lost sheep, fell asleep for fifty-seven years and on awakening resumed his search unaware that so much time had passed. The oracle of Delphi then recruited Epimenides to cleanse Athens of a plague. Bao sees parallels between our slumbers and Epimenides', and between *Zwicky*'s task upon coming awake and that of the ancient Greek shepherd.

Briefly, Roosenno, like Odenwald, plans to send most of his would-be colonists down-phase until planetary conditions permit their revival. Then they will undertake the daunting task of turning New Home into a permanent human colony. Blessedly, the ark-to-ark redundancy of our skills makes the separate agendas of our ships both feasible and attractive. The survival of our kind, we feel, depends not only on diversity, but also on our projection across as much of the inhabitable or terraformable galaxy as we can reach.

How did we make these decisions? Most democratically, in the extraordinary session I will now describe.

Twelve days ago, when Odenwald first broached this plan in the auditorium of *Annie*'s A-Tower, few of us could credit that he wanted us to vote on an "option" as hare-brained as *resuming* our expedition. We had gathered, after dozens and dozens of rim-car trips, to discuss the issue in face-to-face assembly (rather than from separate electronic carrels), and the first question from the floor surprised no one, least of all Stefan Odenwald himself.

"How can we go on to another solar system when by most cogent reckonings, we've nearly exhausted our supplies of antihydrogen ice?" Thom Koon asked this for everyone but about thirty techs and/or scientists already in the know.

At the head of our banner-hung auditorium, Odenwald asked Thich Ngoc Bao to reply. Bao stepped to the podium to address us: "Good evening."

I had Dean in my lap, for Odenwald had told us that no one should miss this gathering; that, in fact, children should also attend.

So when Bao said, "Good evening," we replied in kind, like children answering a teacher.

Dean, waving crazily, called out, *"Bao! Bao! Bao!"* until I brought his arm down and whispered as quietly as the noise level allowed, "Hush, DeBoy. Hush."

Dean hushed.

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"Hydrogen is no problem," Bao said confidently, his reedy voice echoing. "We harvested this fuel during the deceleration process, from the Barricado on in."

"What about the antihydrogen?" Thom cried. "Do you guys plan to turn regular hydrogen molecules inside out?"

Bao shifted his weight. "You should know that every ship in our armada, including *Chandrasekhar*"—he briefly shut his eyes—"was built with the capacity to generate antihydrogen for travel *beyond* the Epsilon Eridani system."

This news stunned most of us in the A-Tower auditorium. *I* had certainly never supposed us to have the ability to journey to another system, perhaps even back to Earth. And none of my friends—with the conspicuous exception of Thich Ngoc Bao—had suspected it either.

"How can we do that?" somebody shouted.

"Each ark is also a cyclotron, a particle accelerator," Bao said. "Each accelerator runs right down the underside of the fuel wheel itself, around its circumference. Given enough time and energy, the cyclotron belting *Annie Jump* will produce the hydrogen antiprotons necessary to fuel our journey from here to Tau Ceti."

Across the hall from where Lily, Dean, and I sat, Milo Pask stood up and shouted, "You geniuses kept this a *secret?* Why? Are we nonphysicists mere freeloaders? Idiot peons unworthy of consultation?"

Odenwald rejoined Bao at the podium. "Please recall that when the U.N. originally began planning a mission to Epsilon Eridani, we didn't know for sure if any planet out here would prove suitable for colonization. We thought it highly likely, of course, but didn't really know."

"Sir, what's your *point?*" Milo Pask.

"Simply that our mission's first mandate was one of hopeful exploration. Originally, then, U.N. planners allotted us only *two* ships, both of which were to have antimatter factories so that they could return to Earth after exploring the target star system. In that scenario, I'll remind you, *Annie Jump Cannon* didn't even exist."

Pask, peevishly flushed, was still on his feet, and an undercurrent of impatience—lapping the commander, not Pask—ran through the hall.

"During this initial planning," Odenwald went on, "off-Earth telescopes on Luna and the moons of Mars strengthened the case for a habitable planet here in EE. As a result, our mission changed, from one of exploring and establishing a permanent base if conditions allowed, to one of pure colonization. That change led us to add a third ship and extra people, not only because many more nations were clamoring to take part but also because planting a successful colony requires a diverse genepool and a third ship would give us insurance against an act of fate. In this, by the way, you can see how prescient the U.N. planners proved themselves."

"What about the antimatter factories?" Pask yelled.

"When we added *Annie,* mission costs skyrocketed. The most effective way to cut costs was to dump the notion of putting an accelerator on each

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vessel. Bao here, along with Trachtenberg and Arbib, considered that suicidal; the manufacturers of our wheelships thought it a kind of sacrilege—namely, bad design—and worked fiendishly to come up with a dirt-cheap redesign that would save the antimatter factories. They did. Then they shunted their costs into other systems, at least on disk, and actually built the accelerators. Unfortunately, they couldn't test them without betraying their presence, and they had no money for testing anyway. So the planners kept them a secret—to prevent protests, work stoppages, maybe even the collapse of the entire project."

Pask was having none of this. "Why keep the accelerators a secret once we'd fled our Earthbound debts? It all smacks of a sleazy elitism!"

"Damned straight!" people cried.

"¡Eso es verdad!"

"Go get 'em, Milo!"

"¡Claro que si!"

Like a bidder at a noisy auction, Odenwald raised his arm. "True, once we were on our way, no one on our dirty, anarchic planet was going to stop us. We had what we needed, and we ran so far beyond Earth's jurisdiction as to become a species apart from those left behind. So we stayed mum, both over the radio and aboard our ships, out of respect."

"Respect?" several people cried incredulously.

Odenwald increased the gain on his mike. "We didn't want to rub our patrons' noses in either our early defiance or our present freedom. More important, we were afraid the cyclotrons might not work. We had no reason to try them while in transit and no desire to raise false hopes about their capabilities if the trip to Eppie went forward smoothly, as it did until we hit the Barricado. And even the painful loss of *Chandrasekhar* did nothing to persuade Commander Roosenno or me we should tell you the accelerators existed. What for? Epsilon Eridani Two—New Home—still looked to be a viable colony site. So our silence about them was meant to keep everyone up-phase focused on our prime destination, *not* to relegate any of you to the status of mere steerage riders."

"But that's what it did!" Pask shouted. "Knowing we could go from this system to another, and maybe even from Tau Ceti to yet another one, would've eased our minds! It would've saved *me* a lot of anxiety!"

Pask looked around. Odenwald's explanation had quieted the bulk of the hall. Reluctantly, Pask sat down, and Bao moved up to the podium again to speak:

"Recent tests of the accelerators on *Annie Jump* and *Fritz Zwicky* confirm their reliability. Tau Ceti is closer to Eppie than Eppie is to Sol. We can accomplish the trip without undue emotional stress or physical hardship—in about half the time it took to come here. I have nothing else to add unless some of you have technical inquiries that would fall within my areas of expertise."

"Wonderful!" someone not far from me shouted—Thom Koon, I think. "A mere half century!"

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"Ursidormizine slumber will turn that half century into a sleep and a forgetting," Bao said smoothly.

Too smoothly, I'm afraid.

The med techs responsible for maintaining the bioracks and their monitoring systems had seats on a catwalk to Bao's left; a dozen of them stood up and booed. Several other maintenance specialists—down on the floor with Lily, Dean, and me—joined the med techs in jeering Bao's proposal.

"Booooo! Booooo!" The auditorium echoed with this ugly rumbling. A few people began to stamp their feet.

"It's Bao, not Boo," Bao told us. "You're using the wrong dipthong."

Not many of Bao's auditors—if you could call them that—caught this witticism. In fact, the booing and foot-stamping got louder. Here and there throughout the hall, people stood to voice their dissent, if not their outrage.

When the woman in front of me rose, Dean struggled out of my lap and held himself upright with his feet on my thighs. I could no longer see the podium.

"Quiet!" I heard Odenwald's amplified voice say. *"Resume your seats!"*

In the face of this esteemed authority, the mutiny more or less ended. Silence settled. People sat back down. Tension, however, left an inaudible buzz in the air; and if Pask or some other aggrieved renegade chose to challenge Odenwald, I feared that chaos—out-and-out insurrection—would erupt in full and undefeatable cry.

Meanwhile, Dean continued to balance himself erect on my thighs. When I tried to tug him back down, he seized the chair back in front with one hand and, with the other, fended off my frustrated tugging.

"Bao!" Dean shouted into the silence. *"Bao! Bao! Bao!"* He pistoned his right arm, an emphatic machine, up and down. *"Bao! Bao! Bao!"*

At the mike again, Bao said, "Of all the learned people in this gathering today, only young Gwiazda seems to know how to pronounce my name. Thank you, Dean."

"Bao!" Dean shouted again. "Bao, holy crow, you are really welcome!" Then eased back into my lap.

A ripple of applause and a drizzle of cheers boomed into a tidal swell of acclamation. Singlehandedly, so to speak, Dean had scotched any threat of mayhem.

Lily rolled her eyes at me. She patted Dean on the leg. Under her breath, she murmured, "Way to go, Tiny Tim. And God bless us, every one."

Bao had control of the meeting again. He pointed out that even if we moved *Annie* ten times closer to Eppie than New Home orbited—to make use of the energy generated by the solar cells affixed to the hydrogen tanks covering our fuel wheel—we would still require about eighty-five days to create a single ton of antihydrogen. Given *Annie*'s overall weight and the speeds that we had to achieve to complete our journey to Tau

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Ceti in fifty years, it would take another half century, up front, to concoct the 370 tons of antimatter necessary for our trip.

If Bao had given us this news a moment ago, an all-out riot would have broken out. As it was, we began to hear hostile—if not downright bloody—murmurings again.

Greta Agostos stood up. "That puts us back to where we were when we left Earth—a century away from our destination! Possibly more!"

"If I could lessen the time and energy requirements," Bao said, "believe me, I would. But some things are givens. You either deal with them or pitch an infantile tantrum. I would strongly urge the former."

"Amen," said Milo Pask. "Amen." And his consent, after the outrage he'd so angrily voiced, seemed to bring a rational truce upon the convocation.

Odenwald took over good-naturedly from Bao, secret-keeper par excellence, and let it be known that Commander Roosenno and he favored a plan whereby *Fritz Zwicky* stayed in orbit around New Home until it became habitable again and *Annie Jump* went on to the Tau Ceti system. However, within certain well-defined parameters, they would permit personnel exchanges between our ships: the trade-offs mustn't drastically unbalance the skills available to either the would-be colonists or the interstellar voyagers. Whatever we did, long stretches of ursidormizine slumber lay ahead of us, as did a host of catch-as-catch-can repairs. Our wheelships, after all, were *old*. On Earth, we'd regard them as antiques.

"But the plan favored by Commander Roosenno and me isn't a *fait accompli*," Odenwald said. "I called you here to vote on, not merely to endorse, it, and I trust you to discuss and pass on the question like intelligent adults."

I squeezed Dean's leg and whispered to Lily, "Do our less than genius kids get a vote too?"

"Ask him," Lily said *sotto voce*.

But before I could, Kaz had risen to his feet. "Sir, why don't we return to Earth—not just *Annie Jump*, but *Fritz Zwicky* too? Tau Ceti may well lack a colonizable planet, and New Home may never recover from its asteroid strike."

"Are you making a motion that we return to Earth?"

"No, sir. I'm putting it forward as an option worthy of debate. The Sol system bred and gave us birth. Neither Tau Ceti nor Epsilon Eridani can say as much, and some of us now have children. Who wishes to doom them to death in an alien star system with no provision for basic human needs—food, air, water, a sense of belonging?"

Kaz sat down, and we debated the matter. Few wanted to return to Earth. In a quick poll, even our children rejected that option. We had fled Earth to explore, to claim new and rejuvenating territories for our species, not to bail out when that very enterprise—as we had known it would do and so had tried to anticipate—threw obstacles in our way. Besides, we all owed the universe a death, and better to pay up seeking a fruitful tomorrow than retreating to a polluted cradle.

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When Odenwald actually called the vote, less than a hundred people selected the return-to-earth option. Not even Kaz voted for it. He had raised the question with an eye on the future of the innocents born in transit to New Home, and I respected his love and scrupulosity in this. He had completely overcome his early bias against Dean.

After that, the final vote was easy. *Annie Jump Cannon*'s personnel overwhelmingly approved Commander Odenwald's plan to resupply ourselves with antihydrogen ice and then to set out for Tau Ceti. A gathering like ours on *Fritz Zwicky* approved Roosenno's plan to remain in orbit, waiting out the dust storm and the greenhouse effect on New Home. If we were all equally lucky, *Annie* would leave for Tau Ceti about the time those on *Zwicky* ventured to the surface for the initial steps of their colony planting.

"Hooray!" cried Dean, clapping, when Odenwald announced the results of our vote. *"Bao! Bao! Bao!"*

At the end of this same meeting, Odenwald congratulated us not only on our decisions, but also on having participated in humanity's first successful venture to another solar system. Whatever happens to us in the coming weeks, months, and years, we have made history, and no one can take that achievement away from us.

"So Commander Roosenno and I agree that we should *celebrate* our arrival here," Odenwald told us. "We therefore decree a three-day festival, to begin officially at 0800 hours the day after tomorrow."

And so it has happened—namely, an alternately solemn and gala commemoration of what we've done, featuring personnel exchange between our wheelships and continuous ship-to-ship TV broadcasts. Our revelries have included songfests, skits, mess parties, musical competitions, art shows, vidouts, seminars, and, most important to me, poetry head-to-heads.

Thich Ngoc Bao on *Annie Jump* and Bashemath Arbib on *Fritz Zwicky* organized competitions in the writing of ballads, odes, sonnets, sestinas, and haiku, among other forms, and required contestants to use different astrophysical phenomena as their poems' subjects or controlling metaphors.

Inevitably, Ghulam Sharif and I found ourselves squared off in three categories, the most amusing a haiku-writing contest. We wrote in our cubicles aboard our own ships, but the finished poems flashed onto toadstool units everywhere as well as onto the huge softscreens in our A-Tower auditoriums.

In her broadcast introduction, Arbib explained, "In its classical form, the Japanese haiku evokes a season. So each contestant must write four poems, using astrophysical phenomena for their primary metaphors. . . ."

Ghulam and I had ten minutes for each haiku, after which we screened them simultaneously (despite their staggered display here), on penalty of disqualification. Their progression ran winter, spring, summer, fall:

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Sharif

Interstellar planet
ice glistens in star-lit dark:
does it dream of spring?

Hydrogen ions
chirp and twitter microwaves
making nests: the stars

Swelling blue-white star
outshines the bright galaxy
spraying iron, salt: us

Hoard scant hydrogen
against the final darkness:
stars, like leaves, turn red

Gwiazda

Each vast aggregate
glitters, a many-armed flake:
beautiful, unique

Plasma stirs and jets:
a furnace catalyzer
in cold birth-throe depths

Warm fireflies float
amid the midnight showers:
blaze and drop, then gone

A jack o'lantern
Hisses on its black sky loam:
baleful, squat, too red

I leave to you the discovery of the astrophysical concepts used metaphorically in each haiku, but note that both sequences conclude with the word *red* as a combination of coincidence and contest design.

Three hundred persons—150 from *Zwicky*, a like number from *Annie*—selected the winning sequence in a blind electronic vote, Sharif triumphing 167 to 132. (Attribute the lost vote to an abstainer who adjudged both sequences "insufficiently imaginative" to bother choosing.) But I take some consolation from the fact that, in a separate vote, my haiku for summer was the overall favorite.

And then Epsilon Eridani Days, an entertaining success in nearly every way, concluded.

Once again, every member of our great expedition must face the realities of our present circumstances and the obligations of our choices.

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* * *

Among my friends and acquaintances, Milo Pask, Etsuko Endo, Indira Sescharchari, Masoud Nadeq, and my arkboard lover, Lily Aliosi-Stark, have chosen to transfer to Roosenno's ark to wait for the dust cloud from Epimenides to settle. The defection that stings most painfully, of course, is the last.

"Abel, I've been down-phase in umpity-ump extended comas here on *Annie,*" Lily told me a few hours ago. "I could handle another U-nap or two, but after I come up-phase again, I want to *stay* up-phase. I want to get on with my life. Is that so selfish a wish?"

"No more than my own," I said. "What about Dean?"

"We made him together, Abel, but he's yours. You have his life in your hands—insofar as *any* of us has control out here—and I expect you to do right by him."

"He's going with me."

"Of course he is. Nothing else makes sense. But I still expect you to do right by him."

"I won't let him forget you."

"That's one right thing you can try, but sooner or later he'll forget. Don't *force* him to remember. I won't mind if I'm just a nagging piece of grit in his memory. Eventually, if he has you to count on, that's all I should be."

"What crap," I said. "You sound like Joan of Arc praying amidst the flames."

For an instant, Lily's gaze darkened. Then she began to laugh. "I do, don't I? Well, good for me."

Using Colombo tethers and transfer dinghies, those leaving *Annie* carried their bodies across to *Zwicky,* sundering their souls from ours. But before these leavetakings, we took our melancholy last farewells. Dean, Kaz, and I met with Lily at the G-Tower docking station.

"It's like you guys're dying," Lily told us. "I'll never see you—any of you—again."

I kissed Lily. Hard. I kissed her again, caressing her hair. When I let go, Dean—DeBoy, as Lily had always called him—clung to her like a sorrowful young orang. If Kaz had not distracted him, she would have probably had to have emergency surgery to pry him loose.

Later, I watched from the G-Tower observatory as Lily and the others made their slow-motion glides across to or over from *Zwicky.* It seemed to me, though, that the dinghy containing my lover drew across the dark with it, in a harness of fireflies, a vein from my own clamoring heart.

A delusion, of course; a trick of the vacuum.

Nonetheless, it made me remember a haiku that Ghulam Sharif had written in the wake of our contest and sent over to me with a friend as a parting gift:

Iron cinders of stars

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cool in expanding darkness:
too late for regrets

"Guh-bye!" cried Dean, one hand on the viewport. "Guh-bye, Mama!"

Odenwald had okayed Dean's presence upstairs, and as his doting goduncle, Kaz had carried him up—for, under the present circumstances, kids had plenty of business in the observatory. Plenty.

"Guh-bye, guh-bye! Holy crow!"

Without Lily bodily before him, DeBoy truly understood only that *Annie Jump Cannon* was going on another long trip and that he was going with. ●

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Cri de Coeur would not exist in its present form without the selfless vetting, advice, and contributions of my friend and fellow writer, Geoffrey A. Landis.

Additionally, Geoff wrote the five haiku in *Cri de Coeur* attributed to "Ghulam Sharif." They are copyright ©1993 by Geoffrey A. Landis, who agrees to their use in any authorized publication of *Cri de Coeur.*

Again, I owe a huge debt to Geoff, not only for providing these five poems, but also for astute advice about textual as well as technical matters. Nevertheless, any errors, literary or scientific, remaining in the manuscript are mine alone, even if I cringe to admit it.

—Michael Bishop

THE BEAUTIFUL SWAN

Of course I always liked different.
(Now we know why.)
Of course I'd have given anything to look like you.
(Did you have to keep reminding me?)
Now you've outgrown your cute stage
and I've outgrown my ugly one:
you'd think the voices of those calling me beautiful
would be enough to drown the echoes of your taunts,

wouldn't you?

—Vivian Vande Velde

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8TH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD RESULTS

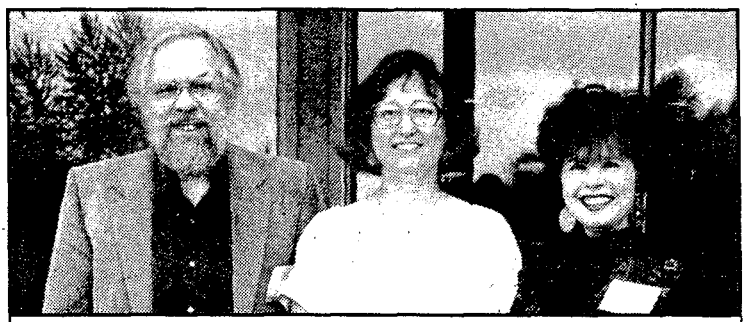

Photo by C.N. Brown/Locus

From left to right: Bruce Boston, Connie Willis, and Nancy Kress.

Well, another year has whizzed by, and *that* means that it's time to tell you the winners of *Asimov's Science Fiction*'s Eighth Annual Readers' Award Poll. As always, these were *your* choices, the stories and artwork and poetry that *you*—the readers—liked best out of all the stuff we published in 1993. The readers were the only judges for this particular award—no juries, no experts—and, once again, it's intriguing to compare results with the Hugo and Nebula ballots, as well as with the readers' polls conducted by *Locus* and *SF Chronicle*. This year's winners, and runners-up, were:

NOVELLA

1. **Dancing on Air, Nancy Kress**
2. Cold Iron, Michael Swanwick
3. The Consort, Isaac Asimov
4. Down the River, R. Garcia y Robertson
5. Kamehameha's Bones, Kathleen Ann Goonan
6. Sister Alice, Robert Reed
7. An American Childhood, Pat Murphy
8. Ice Atlantis, Valerie J. Freireich
9. Stairway, Mary Rosenblum
10. The Last Castle of Christmas, Alexander Jablokov

NOVELETTE

1. **Inn, Connie Willis**
2. Beneath the Stars of Winter, Geoffrey A. Landis
3. Death on the Nile, Connie Willis
4. Deep Eddy, Bruce Sterling
5. Winter Flowers, Tanith Lee
6. Cush, Neal Barrett, Jr.
7. The Undifferentiated Object of Desire, Ian McDonald (tie)
7. Papa, Ian R. MacLeod (tie)
8. One Morning in the Looney Bin, Maggie Flinn
9. The Shadow Knows, Terry Bisson
10. Microde City, Jim Young (tie)
10. The Franchise, John Kessel (tie)

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SHORT STORY

1. **Martin on a Wednesday, Nancy Kress**
2. More Things in Heaven and Earth, Isaac Asimov
3. "White!" Said Fred, Esther M. Friesner (tie)
3. River Man, Michael H. Payne (tie)
4. The Country Doctor, Steven Utley
5. Tagging the Moon, S.P. Somtow
6. In the Hole with the Boys with the Toys, Geoffrey A. Landis
7. Close Encounter, Connie Willis
8. Being Human, Mark Bourne (tie)
8. Snow Scene with Frozen Rabbit, William John Watkins (tie)
8. Mwalimu in the Squared Circle, Mike Resnick (tie)
8. Some Old Lover's Ghost, Ian McDowell (tie)
9. Roadkill, Sage Walker
10. The Murderer, Lawrence Watt-Evans

BEST POEM

1. **Curse of the Shapeshifter's Wife, Bruce Boston**
2. Curse of the Telepath's Wife, Bruce Boston
3. If Angels Ate Apples, Geoffrey A. Landis
4. If You Loved Me, Mary A. Turzillo
5. The Time Tour Stops at My House After Lunch, William John Watkins
6. Curse of the Angel's Wife, Bruce Boston
7. Solo, Joe Haldeman
8. Some Personal Pronouns, Tom Disch
9. Downtime on Digger's World, William John Watkins
10. The Dusts of Palamon Are Bliss, William John Watkins

BEST COVER ARTIST

1. **Wojtek Siudmak**
2. Keith Parkinson
3. Jim Burns
4. Mark Harrison
5. Lee MacLeod
6. Todd Lockwood (tie)
6. Gary Freeman (tie)
7. Chris Moore
8. Wayne Barlowe
9. E.T. Steadman
10. Daniel Kirk

BEST INTERIOR ARTIST

1. **Steve Cavallo**
2. Laurie Harden
3. Gary Freeman
4. Alan M. Clark
5. Ron Chironna
6. George H. Krauter
7. Laura Lakey
8. Pat Morrissey (tie)
8. Janet Aulisio (tie)
9. Carol Heyer
10. Beryl Bush

Both our Readers' Awards and *Analog*'s Analytical Laboratory Awards were announced on April 23, 1994 at the River Valley Inn in Eugene, Oregon, during a breakfast hosted by Publisher Christoph Haas-Heye. After breakfast, the awards were presented in a brief ceremony, each winner receiving a cash award and a certificate. Of the *Asimov's* winners, Nancy Kress (twice! although, somewhat unfairly, she didn't get to eat two *breakfasts*), Connie Willis, and Bruce Boston were on hand to receive their awards in person; other guests at the award breakfast included Charles N. Brown, publisher of *Locus*, Carol Buchanan, Cordelia Willis, and several of the Analytical Laboratory winners. Later on that evening, everyone assembled for the annual Nebula Award Banquet, which was also held at the River Valley Inn, and then partied on long into the Oregon night, although nobody got quite merry enough to stumble into the river that flowed alongside the hotel—as far as we know, anyway!

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ON BOOKS

by Moshe Feder

Hot Sky at Midnight

by Robert Silverberg

Bantam Spectra, $22.95 (hardcover)

When reading for myself, I've tended to avoid stories set in the near future. This is partly because the near future rarely holds the strangeness and wonder I come to science fiction for, partly because I had my fill of it in the depressing cautionary SF that was rife in the '60s, and partly because I grew up on stories in which the **FUTURE** was the very decade we're living in now! Having had this experience makes it harder to take such stories seriously. I've long maintained that the near future deserves more attention from politicians and less from SF writers.

So I was surprised at how much I enjoyed this new novel by Robert Silverberg. Yes, the setting, a twenty-second century Earth that is the victim of the twentieth century's ecological rape, is depressing. Yes, the characters, having been shaped by their environment, are not always fun to be around. Yes, the ending leaves us wondering if we've really gotten anywhere. (Though in the last two pages a small surprise rounds out the plot more neatly than we'd expected while offering a shred of hope to cling to.) Yet I found myself reluctant to put the galley aside and eager to return to it.

Silverberg is a master of pacing and structure, and his characters, even the losers, engage our attention if not always our sympathy, and so we willingly enter their world. It is a world where humanity is divided between the wounded home planet and the nearby havens of orbital habitats. It is a world where the great powers are not nations, but "megacorporations" dominated by the Japanese (most of whom have left a Japan flooded by the rising seas). The two largest of these powers loom in the background of the story and shape, directly and indirectly, the fate of the characters as they hope to shape the fate of the human race.

Samurai Industries would do this through the transformation of humanity into a species that could survive in the low-oxygen poisonous atmosphere expected by 2350. Say good-bye to hemoglobin! Kyocera-Merck, on the other hand, chooses to look outward. They are developing the first FTL drive. Since the drive interferes with normal vision, their solution is to have a crew with blindsight, an eyeless form of vision based on energies other than light. Which brings us, in roundabout fashion, to where the story begins: Victor Farkas, an

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eyeless, blindsighted agent for K-M, arrives on the orbital banana republic called Valparaiso Nuevo, a sanctuary world where he hopes to find the doctor whose war-crime prenatal genetic surgery made Farkas what he is.

Paul Carpenter is a Salaryman Level Eleven for Samurai whose most recent of many assignments has been as a weatherman in the desert at Spokane. Now an old friend calls with a chance for a new assignment, commanding an iceberg trawler sailing out of San Francisco. Two hours jacked into the proper indoctrination cube will give him the expertise he'll need. Success could mean a shot at Level Ten and up from there, and at least it will be wet, so he takes it. In doing so he starts on a long, convoluted path that will bring him to Valparaiso Nuevo, and to a fateful encounter with Victor Farkas.

In the end, it's not the details of the plot, simple but artfully managed though they are, that make this impressive, but Silverberg's ability to use them, and to use his believably adult, believably messed-up characters, to get us to think about and care about the near future again, and to care about its people, who are, after all, ourselves, and our children.

Nightside the Long Sun
by Gene Wolfe
Tor Books, $21.95 (hardcover)
Tor Books, $4.95 (paperback)

Lake of the Long Sun
by Gene Wolfe
Tor Books, $22.95 (hardcover)

As a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* in the '80s, I had the privilege of being the first to proclaim *The Shadow of the Torturer* and the subsequent volumes of *The Book of the New Sun* as a new masterpiece of the genre.

Although I don't have primacy this time, it's still a privilege to report on a masterwork in the making, which is what we have in these first two volumes of *The Book of the Long Sun*. This is, in fact, a sequel to the previous tetralogy, but the connection is esoteric unless you have a good memory for names and it doesn't really matter; the work stands very well on its own.

The Long Sun is the artificial light source that runs down the axis of the Whorl, a hollow-world type generation ship that has left Urth far behind. The majority of the inhabitants are unaware of the nature of their environment—although they can see cities in the sky above them—or the purpose of their journey. These and other secrets remain to be discovered by the young man at the focus of our attention, Patera Silk, although so far at least such discoveries seem incidental to his personal quest.

Silk is the augur of the old manteion on Sun Street, a poor quarter, in the city of Viron—in other words, a priest of the curious polytheistic religion of the Whorl who presides at animal sacrifices, reads the future in the victims' entrails and implores the gods to appear in the large glass screens that are a central feature in each sanctuary.

Silk is earnest, a sincere believer in his faith, and honest, not one to imagine that his superiors might be any less so. But, in fact, they have decided to dispense with the

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manteion where Silk presides and have sold it to a crime lord named Blood. Thus Silk is forced to take drastic measures to secure the return of the manteion to the service of the people. In the course of invading Blood's house he even discovers a talent for breaking and entering. But along with his sense of justice, he is impelled by a mystical vision, contact with a deity from outside the Whorl, a deity asking something of him that he gropes to understand. Others, having a more mundane destiny in mind for him, have made his name the center of a nascent revolution, painting it in slogans on walls around town.

To work it all out, Silk readily and unselfconsciously consorts with a colorful cast of characters including thieves, spies, prostitutes, android nuns, talking birds, and deities. Sometimes naïve, but acutely observant and very bright, Silk will need all his wits about him to come through the changes in store for him, Viron, and the Whorl.

Readers likewise will need their wits about them to squeeze all the juice out of these two very richly filled volumes and the two more to come. Wolfe's ability to suggest the multifarious complexities of a whole world and society is undiminished. If the work so far seems a cut below *The Book of the New Sun* in overall grandeur and impact—a subjective reaction that could still be modified by the last two volumes—*The Book of the Long Sun* is nevertheless surely destined to be judged one of the great SF-literary achievements of the decade.

Night Relics

by James P. Blaylock
Ace, $18.95 (hardcover)

In choosing the books I'd review this time, one of my aims was to catch up with authors whose work I hadn't been following closely, although I'd been hearing good things about them. In the case of James P. Blaylock this information came not just from word of mouth but from the entry on him in the new edition of *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* that I just happened to come across while browsing.

(The *Encyclopedia* by the way, is a sterling work that no serious student of the genre should be without. It's expensive, granted, but worth every penny. All praise to St. Martin's for seeing to it that there's an American edition.)

When I asked Ace for a galley of Blaylock's new book, they warned me it was a straight ghost story. I knew better; Blaylock hasn't written a "straight" anything in his life. As *TESF* puts it, he ". . . has no interest at all in generic purity, mixing tropes from fantasy, horror, SF, magical realism, adventure fiction and mainstream literature with great aplomb, as if it were the most natural thing in the world." *This* sounded like someone whose work I wanted to know! That's still true, but Ace was right; *Night Relics is* a straight ghost story.

So I decided to review it anyway.

Blaylock may ". . . have no interest at all in generic purity . . . ," but I do. I find it interesting that ghost stories are not usually thought of as part of our SF/Fantasy(-Horror) genre—a feeling of dis-

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tinctness shared by readers and by marketers. This is probably related to the fact that ghost stories are the fantastic tales with the oldest heritage, an established part of oral culture and then of written literature long before the genre question arose. Yet I think a case can be made that they belong on the same continuum as the other works we examine here. After all, don't they rely on the same willing suspension of disbelief?

Trabuco Canyon is one of those odd corners of southern California, a rough wilderness with a few antique houses, some no more than cabins, but just a short drive over dirt trails to the urban sprawl of Orange County. Not a bad place if you like quiet and solitude, except when the Santa Ana winds are blowing, as they do all through this story.

Peter Travers moved to the canyon after his marriage began to come apart. Now Amanda, from whom he is separated, and their son David are missing. There have been reports of a woman and boy seen in the canyon; someone even thought he saw bodies at the bottom of a cliff. But there is no physical sign of Amanda and David. As time goes on Peter will encounter this ghostly pair himself. They both are, but mostly aren't, the people he's looking for.

Peter's lover, Beth Potter, is being haunted herself, or maybe stalked would be a better term. Her neighbor Lance Klein, in the middle of a real estate scam involving property in the canyon, has made the mistake of hiring Bernard Pomeroy, a small-time hustler and conman, to help him convince cabin owners to sell. Pomeroy is not just a master of small, mean tricks, he's also a paranoid, barely controlled sexual psychopath for whom Beth becomes a new obsession. When Klein, a decent man in his way, despite his business, finds out, he tries to protect Beth without explaining what he knows.

In time, Klein too will have his life changed by their spectral neighbors. Like Peter and the others who meet them, he will find himself caught up in their endlessly reenacted story, as if in a dream he can't awake from.

Not until the wind stops blowing and the relics of the title are discovered is all this resolved. Blaylock does a good job managing his crescendo of portents, and balancing the contemporary, specific threat of Pomeroy with the ageless, amorphous one of the ghosts. Yet the final clash of cymbals has a bit of a thud to it.

Ghost stories are about the meaning of life as defined by tasks undone, they are about mortality, memory, and human emotion as a force of nature. Because so many of the elements have become cliché or corny—as here, the crime of passion, the old house, the meaningful objects, etc.—it has become difficult to produce the desired effects. As in any SF or fantasy story, the reader must be made to accept the fantastic, a harder task when the surrounding setting is merely the familiar world.

Pomeroy represents both Blaylock's success and his failure in this book. As a character, he's a significant achievement, thoroughly believable and unspeak-

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ably creepy, perhaps worth reading the book for if minor monsters are an interest. However, nothing on the supernatural side of the story, deftly choreographed though it may be, is ever quite as convincing or has anywhere near Pomeroy's impact. That being the case, it's hard to consider this, despite some virtues, a completely successful ghost story.

The Iron Dragon's Daughter

by Michael Swanwick
AvoNova, $23.00 (hardcover)

Wow!

The first five chapters of this novel comprise some of the most marvelous world-spinning it's ever been my pleasure to enjoy. I had a grand time engaging in that fundamental SF reader's task of trying to figure out where I was and what the rules were. I'll have to deprive you of that pleasure to say much more about this book, so run right out and buy it now and read at least the first eighty-one pages. I promise you won't regret it.

Back? Good. So now we can talk about how Swanwick has given us a new vision of Faerie for the fin de siècle, a world parallel to our own that has overcome its ancient aversion to iron and achieved a potent combination of technology and magic. Jane, a human changeling, is a misfit in this world but determined to make her way in it. Since she was taken from Earth, she's been a slave in the plant where dragons are built—dragons are this world's equivalent of a B-1. She conceives a plan to steal a dragon and escape. The theft turns into a partnership, and it succeeds in freeing her. Unfortunately, she is not free of the dragon, Melanchthon, who wants something more from her.

We follow Jane as she is educated and matures and learns about her ever-surprising world. If there isn't uniformly and continually the frisson of wonder that permeates the early chapters, it remains great fun all the way through. Where else could we find shopping malls with the timelessness of classic fairy-hills (where Jane's being human gives her an edge in shoplifting), wickerman type human sacrifices with elements of a high-school homecoming celebration, college sexual experimentation used for divination, or a city of giant towers linked by bridges in which huge elevators make up the mass transit and private elevators are the equivalent of limousines?

As Jane's university work toward her degree in alchemy proceeds, she becomes hardened to the necessities of survival and the sometimes grim prerequisites for success. One day it's using voodoo on her roommate, another it's stealing a human hand from the Anatomy morgue to make a Hand of Glory and rob an elf lord's penthouse, then, when her scholarship is suspended, it's selling a book of lore stolen from the university library to a lamia. Her goal remains constant: escape, not from a finite place this time, but from this whole world. On astral trips she visits her mother on Earth, in what her mother thinks are dreams, and promises to return to her in reality. But Melanchthon has plans of his own.

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There will be arguments about how satisfying this novel's ending is; I'm still fighting it out with myself. There can be no argument that this is a major work, entertaining as it is imaginative. I was a supporter of Swanwick's *Stations of the Tide* (1991) for the Hugo. Although the year is still young (as I write), I wouldn't be surprised if I end up advocating this book for the same honor. Don't miss it.

I. Asimov: A Memoir

by Isaac Asimov
Doubleday, $25.00 (hardcover)

With *In Memory Yet Green* (1979) and *In Joy Still Felt* (1980), Isaac gave us the most comprehensive autobiography ever offered by a major SF figure. It might have been enough for some people, but the hardcore crowd (in which I include myself) couldn't help but note that the latter volume only brought his story up to 1978, and we hoped for a third book some day. In a posthumous gift to us all, Isaac has provided the present volume, not just an account of the final years, but a new, full-scale autobiography covering his whole life through May 1990, two years before his death.

Knowing he was nearing the end, Isaac tells his story with even more candor this time. To further avoid redundancy with the earlier books, he tells the story by topic rather than strictly chronologically. The resulting 166 brief chapters will be like factual potato chips for anyone who cared about Isaac and his work—you won't be able to read just one. If you have a general familiarity with his life, you can even read them brows-ingly, in random order, but I doubt you'll be able to just "dip in" for a couple. They bear such titles as: "Infant Prodigy?," "My Name," "Science Fiction," "The Futurians," "John Wood Campbell, Jr.," " 'Nightfall,' " "Acrophobia," "Doubleday," "Robyn," "Over My Head," and "Janet."

Here can be found the identity of Isaac's favorite dish from his mother's culinary repertoire and the origin of his disciplined work habits in his parents' candy store. We learn that even the phenomenal young Asimov had his academic limitations (he couldn't get beyond integral calculus and so chose not to be a physicist) and his sensitivities (he quit graduate study of zoology after being made to kill a cat). Admitting his faults in the failure of his first marriage, Isaac also reveals that his relationship with Janet began, innocently, much earlier than some of us realized, and the reader gains an appreciation of how much she meant to him.

Isaac devotes a chapter to his friendship and admiration for Harlan Ellison, and anyone contemplating an attack on Harlan ought to be made to read it first. There are chapters on his relationships with many other great writers as well. Of course, there's a chapter on *Asimov's*, though I doubt there's anything there to surprise a regular reader of the magazine. What may surprise you —given the homebody image he cultivated—is to learn of Isaac's travels. After getting to the west coast by train, Janet insisted they stop at Disneyland. Isaac was reluctant but ended up enjoying it

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tremendously. Even more surprisingly, Isaac made it to England, where he cried at Newton's grave. On a later cruise, he and Janet visited Paris! Isaac was there for thirty-six hours and loved it, and somehow I find the image he evokes of the two of them strolling down the Champs-Elysées on a perfect night tremendously heartwarming.

I could go on, but you get the idea. This is a treasure trove of facts and gossip, surprises and reassurances from a full life fully lived. If you loved Isaac and love his work still, whether you met him at one of his numerous convention appearances or simply came to feel he was talking to you through his stories, novels, and nonfiction, *I. Asimov* is your best chance to get to know him better. As has always been the case for those who read his books, you will be the richer for it. ●

I know you're excited. But you should know that tonight's date will lead to a rotten marriage, seven kids, the erosion of a brilliant mind, and a tendency to travel back in time to talk with myself.

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Note the upcoming deadline for $75 memberships in the 1996 WorldCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (self addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JULY 1994

22-24—**ConVersion**. For info, write: **Box 1088, Stn. M, Calgary AB T2P 2K9**. Or phone: **(403) 271-0662 or 248-7402** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Calgary AB (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Marlborough Hotel. Guests will include: F. Pohl, M. Bradley, S. Russell.

22-24—**ConFluence. (412) 344-0456**. Pittsburgh PA. John-Allen Price, David Burkhead. Written SF.

22-24—**Toronto Trek. (416) 699-4666**. Regal Constellation, Toronto ON. M. Barrett, Reeves-Stevens.

22-24—**DexCon. (718) 881-4575**. Holiday Inn, Elizabeth NJ. Third year for this big gaming meet.

22-24—**Fanex. (410) 255-5196 or (301) 645-7507**. Sheraton, Towson MD. SF/horror film festival.

29-31—**RiverCon. (502) 448-6562**. Executive West, Louisville KY. Ackerman, Schwartz, Trestrail.

29-31—**PhroliCon. (215) 341-1672**. Clarion, Mt. Laurel NJ. Tenth anniversary for this relaxacon.

29-31—**NECon. (401) 823-3242**. Bryant College, Smithfield RI. Horror & dark fantasy. B. Lumley.

29-31—**OtaKon. (814) 867-3478**. Days Inn Penn State, State College PA. Japanimation. R. DeJesus.

29-31—**Anime America. (415) 241-8823**. Red Lion, San Jose CA. Japanimation. Go Nagai, S. Perry.

30-31—**NovaCon. (703) 280-5373**. Westpark, Tysons Corner VA (near DC). Star Trek. Koenig, Meaney.

AUGUST 1994

4-7—**Comic Con, Box 128458, San Diego CA 92112. (619) 491-2475**. One of the biggest comics meets.

5-7—**AmniCon, Box 3133, Alton IL 62002**. Radisson, Clayton MO. For fans of (American) animation.

5-7—**VikingCon, Assoc. Students, WWU, Viking Union #V-1, Bellingham WA 98225. (206) 734-0919**.

5-8—**MunchCon, 244 Riverside Dr. #3F, New York NY 10025.** Wilmington DE. For fans of Baum's Oz.

6-7—**MythCon, 9146 Edmonston Rd. 201, Greenbelt MD 20770. (703) 354-5358**. Washington DC.

7-8—**TachyCon, 426 S. Lakemont Ave., Winter Park FL 32792. (407) 628-5047**. Renaissance, Orlando.

12-14—**DiversiCon, Box 8036, Minneapolis MN 55408**. Paul Park. No more on this con at press time.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-9494**. WorldCon. Over C$165 at the door.

AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—**LACon III, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409**. Anaheim CA. The WorldCon. $75 to 8/15/94.

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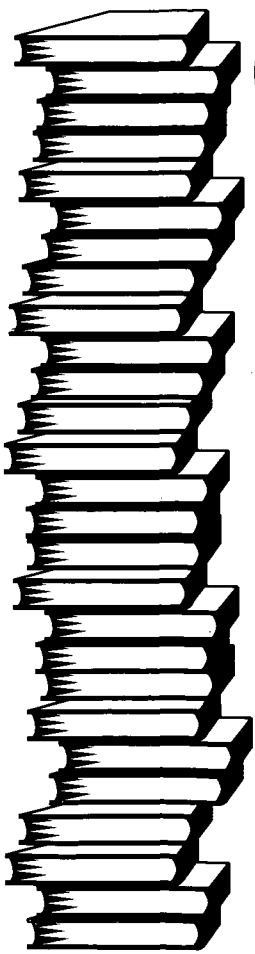

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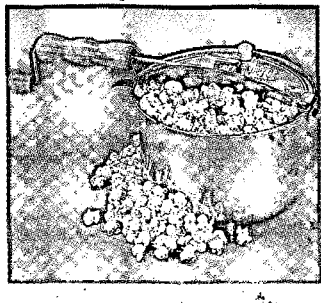

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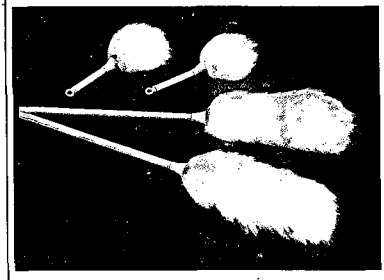

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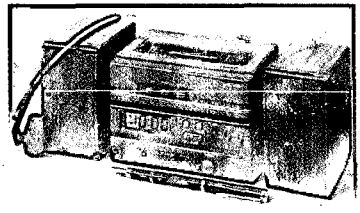

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